# Who Wants to Live Forever

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**Archive Warning:**
No Archive Warnings Apply

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**Characters:**
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# Who Wants to Live Forever

by l1feofthe_party

Summary

The cold, dry Wyoming dirt fills Gale's lungs and passes into his blood, melts into the plasma there, begins making up his body again, it seeps into his white bones and every movement is part of that desert. England had not quite taken the cowboy out of him before he was back again, married and squirming in his bed from the nightmares. He is more than Casper, he wants more than what it gives; John can give him more, but he is half the man he wishes he was, and squirms all the more at night for he thinks little of that kind of adventure, and less still of himself.

Notes

hello and welcome to my second mota fic !! this is gonna be a lot of character study garble about my lovelies, so buckle in for some intense stuff maybe ?? will update tags as i go, anyways, i hope you enjoy :) !

# Chapter 1: Part One: About You, The 1975

Gale

John was kneeling beneath him, large hands wrapped around Gale's thighs, squeezing with a quiet desperation that shimmered in his eyes. Eyes dark like the night, dark as sin. Gale pulled his fingers through his hair, and tugged when it caught on the curls. John seemed to be naked but the haziness of the dream prevented clear vision of his whole body, of down below. John's hands crawled further up his legs and settled on his waist, wrestled to untuck his shirt, gangly fingers nestled just above the waistband of his trousers, and Gale's skin pricked against his touch; he instinctively thrust forward and a thick breath slipped from his throat. He could hardly see the man's face, in the way of dreaming, but there was a certainty that it was John. What should be rough is made softer in the illusion, John's body is malleable, like dough, and can be bent easily into the shape of Gale's hands, the shape of his body; and, like dough, John goes sticky under the growing heat of movement, chunks of him sliding off and dropping to the floor with a dull thud. He is becoming less of a man with each thrust of Gale's cock down his throat, more of a monster, an awful, bulging mass of gravity which Gale must pull himself into. In his dream, a faceless John undoes Gale's belt and reaches for his cock. His hands are trapped in his hair as John opens his mouth and swallows, and even if he is standing tall above John, Gale feels immensely small under his steady gaze, as though he were being pulled apart at the mere contact between their skin, between himself and John's wet mouth. The illusion fades as consciousness moves into him like a fog and his eyes crack open like maybe he had been mummified.

"Morning, gorgeous," Marge says from her place beside him. Usually she woke before him, but it seemed she stayed in bed until he woke. "No bad dreams this time, huh?" She pulled a hand through his hair and kissed him. Then she was gone, to the kitchen to fix him breakfast probably.

He wondered how long she had watched him sleep, watched him dream of John like that. He felt a little sick with guilt, but not as he used to.

It was almost midday on a Sunday, the only day of the week he allowed himself to sleep in because the college course he was taking

had him eating, sleeping and all but dreaming in numbers and equations. It was hard, but it was interesting and it was good. Most of all, it was stable and normal, so he would keep at it, for Marge and for himself. It kept his mind away from the war, from the meagreness of his life now, that he was only moving through his existence rather than actually living.

It was closer to lunchtime than to breakfast, but he could hear the crackling of fried eggs and the strong smell of coffee hit him. He was down in minutes, wrapping his arms around Marge and kissing her cheeks and neck. Her face was still warm from being in bed.

“You’re in a good mood this morning.”

“Yeah I guess so.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Oh, well, just that, I don’t know. I’ve woken up to the most beautiful woman in the world. And now she’s making me a delicious meal. The sun is out finally, and, for once, I don’t have any schoolwork. Don’t know who wouldn’t be in a good mood after all that.”

She plated the food. “Some charmer we have here,” She turned in his arms to face him and smiled bright as daylight, and he kissed her then. “Why don’t we eat before you praise me. Could taste like burnt garbage.” And she slipped from his grasp.

He laughed. “Now we both know it won’t.”

It was simple and easy, the life they had out here in the quiet country where they knew the grocers by name and were invited around for dinner with the neighbours; the weather was perfect for small talk, which there was a lot of; and Gale went to school and studied science, something his parents and brother would scoff at if he still knew them.

It was easy pretending, with the way the light streamed into the rooms of the house, with the endless amount of work that needed completing, and Marge was a very charming, beautiful woman. Every moment was easy to fake because he’d been living it for almost a year now since the war ended. He touched ground on American soil and couldn’t help but feel restless, and sickened with anxiety for what would be his actual life; somehow, in asking Marge to marry him, he had forgotten in the stalag that he, if he survived, would have to be her husband, have to live with her for the rest of his life, or until one

of them died. He had never done something so permanent in all his life. It terrified him, the finality of it, how much of a trap it felt.

The dreams of John had started long before the end of the war, the first of which had been a few days before he was shot down over Bremen. John had been the most tense Gale had seen him that night of Dye's party and Gale assumed it was getting to him, the stress, the fear, finally catching up with him. All through the war Gale had managed to keep his dread in check, telling himself over and over he didn't need an explanation to all those boys' deaths, that Hitler and politics was to blame, not anything like his incompetence.

Then, John started to come undone and Gale's ship had been shot down in the next few days and he was starving in a camp, begging for John to be alright.

The camp had driven him insane, he thinks, because that is where the imaginings and dreams appeared most forcefully. He tried reasoning that it must be natural and common, that as long as it stayed in his own head then it wasn't wrong. For weeks and weeks in the camp he had to wake from disjointed, cold sleep beside John and pretend as though he had not just envisioned the most devastatingly intimate scene of the man.

Marge's yes came in the post, miraculously, and his mouth cracked into a wide smile, dry lips tearing apart from the strain. He felt light headed at the response and put it down as woozy excitement and joy. He knows now that it had not been. The smell of her perfume spritzed across the page filled his head and it took him far from the camp, from war, and from John.

It had not gone unnoticed that John hardly received any letters. Gale watched him grow more agitated and disconsolate as the recovered post was handed out. Letters from brothers, friends, mostly from worried mothers, and, naturally, from Marge. The relief and comfort of receiving a letter, John had not known it in his time trapped or otherwise.

*I don't know if John Egan is the penpal type.*

*Well, maybe if he met a girl worth writing to, he would be.*

A year since the war had ended and the dreams had yet ceased, gross thoughts of John doing indecent things were still at the forefront of his mind if he didn't force them back; he was as insane living with Marge in Wyoming as he had been trapped and held at gunpoint in

Germany.

Gale took to his desk, pen in hand, and scrawled out a letter to John. When he posted it, he hoped John would find some comfort in the words, or at the very least the smell.

John

John never let Gale see him visiting the chapel. Buck exclusively referred to the priest as padre, scoffed at the boys who recited hushed prayers before flying, and his beautiful blue eyes sometimes flicked down to the crucifix John wore along with his dog tags and lingered for milliseconds longer than they should surely because resentment drew him to it. John didn't bring a bible with him to England, and found that the copies there were different. The King James Bible was almost entirely different to the familiarity of the archaism John had grown up with. Most of England was Protestant, and the chapel at Thorpe Abbotts was terribly plain; John hated the blandness of Protestantism. He had grown used to churches littered with crosses and statues, stained glass paintings and elaborate tapestries.

The murky grey of England came complete with meek, bored buildings unfit to be named houses of God.

John has always loved God. No matter how many times he failed them, the church he attended with his family back in Manitowoc always forgave and consoled him. It had felt good to be redeemable, to be allowed back in, back to the comforting embrace of stained glass and solid gold crosses. Churches had always been beautiful to John; the tall ceiling and bright paintings, with expressions so glum they pierced through to your heart, the polished benches, the huge bell, the priest's clothes, the music; nothing was without beauty in the holy house of God.

If they weren't flying, John never failed to attend the Sunday mass. It was something he loved to do with his family, to see friends and relatives, wish them well and catch up, like small Christmases every Sunday morning. He was never really good at keeping still or quiet during the sermons, he could hardly remember all the words to any of the hymns or prayers, but, like when he sang, enthusiasm counted for every bit of love he had for God.

And no matter how much he loved drink or tobacco, he would always love God more. He thinks that's what keeps his head on straight, how

he manages to get out of bed on the mornings adrenaline didn't surge through him. He knows it's why as the days droned on and more boys' faces or limbs had blown off that he could still smile in the evenings and sway to the drift of music, why he could still lead those men. Cannons to the right; canons to the left; cannons right in front of them; riding into the jaws of death, the noble 100th does not return.

The most complicated part though was always the seven sins: naturally John often found himself indulging in their offerings, particularly the teachings of lust, and pride of course for he was still a USAAF pilot. It was no secret Bucky loved women, that he loved to kiss them and take them to dark alleys to work his hands all over them, reaching high up beneath their clothes and holding them close. His inclination to love men in the same ways however, was a close-kept secret between only himself and God.

Sometimes though, paranoia, which had nestled softly in the back of his head between his skull and brain, took sharp control and anxiety burst from deep within his chest and stomach when he turned to look at and talk to his colleagues and friends. In particular, Buck, who he had named after himself, who he hung over and pinched the cheeks of, whose gaze and smile he coveted more than anything; Gale was his best friend and the very light of his eyes.

Once, long before bland churches and miserable weather, John had sworn to never lie with another man, something he wished to forsake to pledge his dedication and loyalty to God. As hard as it was to go about doing, it was an easy thing to fall into because John loved it. He loved anything and everything that would reciprocate even the slightest touch, the tinniest of glances. It is why he keeps crawling back to church even when sermons were full of hateful spats that sentenced him to damnation over and over: if not for the girls and drink, then for his belief and support in red rebel causes, and if not for that then certainly for his being a queer at the very least. If he keeps attending, if he sings the songs and smiles at the priest, then he might hope to be loved by God just the same as everyone else. He truly believes God loves him. He is not wrong.

*

John always believed himself not very beautiful. It was hard to say he was not handsome in a rugged, dark sort of way that made good girls swoon, and paired with his height, broad shoulders, and the overbearing warmth of his personality, he understood why he was easy to like. Even heterosexual men respected a handsome face. But

he was not beautiful. His face could not appear in art, in paint or stone, his body only an extension of his personality, that existed almost entirely in the plane of sexuality, an object of desire because it was there and nothing more.

Perhaps it is because he is not beautiful that he loves to look at beautiful things. He loves the sweeping views from the air, vast stretches of the Texan country, severe craggy mountaintops in the Algerian desert, and stained glass and gold statues. Even London, blown to pieces and glowing with firelight as bombs dropped had been beautiful to watch.

Gale Cleven is a beautiful man. John is well aware he is not the only one to think so, either, for it was obvious the way the men treated him, as though he were an artefact that shouldn't be taken out of its glass case, that, if touched, he might be chipped and damage, or worse, you might get your greasy fingerprints all over him. John thinks when he sees him unclothed that if his head was lopped off he could be placed at the centre of a courtyard or fountain, and people would stare, because he is beautiful. He thinks his eyes hold the world and every beautiful thing in it, that when this man looks at him he might allow him to feel beautiful too for even just a moment.

*

Manitowoc was cold and wet when he arrived. The air was salty and rather than comfort John as it used to, he felt sick at the smell. So, a permanent scowl settled on his features since he arrived home. He intended to stay with his family until he could get back on his feet again and afford a place for himself. Perhaps he would move states, back to warm Texas, or maybe the west coast.

He mostly took odd jobs fixing things, running errands, delivering parcels across states. It was choppy, and he hated it, yet he would have hated school more and his mother didn't want him returning to the air force so soon. Settle in, she had told him, make sure you're working all proper before you go back to all that.

*All that*, had been his life for some few years that felt like centuries and now it was over John was aimless. He had chased adventure and caught himself up in far more than what he had bargained for; his face against piles of rotting bodies, blood that was not his own down his throat, the unbearable stench of infected flesh and endless, cold, grey skies.

Most days that weren't spent working, he was either buried in a book, out with his sister Kathy, or down at the bar by himself probably just listening to the music. He was fond of music before the war, but it was becoming a dependence; John couldn't stand silence any more he could stomach the chunks of fat pork was swathed in, of which had since become inedible because he had seen one too many corpses too close to his skin to be properly comfortable with any meat every again, and, naturally, he was a sissy.

His mother stands over him disapprovingly when he stumbles in drunk at night, collapsing to the floor, but Kathy always manages to wrangle out an excuse and salvage the night. John loved his sister more than anyone else. He thinks that, if it were to protect Kathy, he would go through all that which he had already been through, from the cat soup and imaginary baseball, to the long winter march.

No matter how poorly he behaves however, John never misses a singe Sunday mass. There is comfort to be had in the routine; wake, get dressed, go to church, listen, pray, go home, lunch, and then nothing until it was late enough to get a drink, home again and then it was Monday again. He little enjoyed the disciplinary processes of the air force, but this, this familiarity, he enjoyed.

In church, he prays for Buck's health, for his family's, and for Marge's. He prays they each are okay and will remain that way, that their hardships diminish with time. He apologises to God for his behaviour, for the way he sleeps around, for the men he picks up along the road when travelling for work. He asks to be forgiven for all the lives he's taken and all the ones he didn't save, for all the trouble he's caused and will likely cause. He asks to be lent the strength to keep on because he does not think he will last as he is. Memories haunt him; he begs God to take them from him.

A gaunt-faced polish woman haunts him most lovingly in his dreams, kissing his skin and breathing hotly in his ear. She tells him, every second is a little death, and he claws at her to get off, that Buck is dying, that every second here is death. She holds him down with the strength of ten men, morphs into one herself, with the same blonde hair and blue eyes he is so familiar with. Melting face; cold limbs; a still heart; Buck Cleven is dead and John comes with a force deep from far back in his spine.

He wakes at night, shivering, clutching himself, and shamefully hard. He is afraid to go back to sleep so he plays quiet music and lies on the sofa, his eyes wide and touched with tears. He thinks of Buck more

than he knows is good for his heart and soul, but cannot help himself since he is so in love with him.

Post arrives for John, a handwritten letter, small and scrawly letters fill the page. It is from Buck.

John. It's a wonder you haven't written me already. We're doing well, just want to know how you are. Wouldn't mind you coming down to stay for a while and catch up. I'll hope to see you. Buck.

It was thick with the smell of Buck's aftershave, which made the words look teasing on the page. John knew to smile, but couldn't help feel sick at the smell also, at the suggestion. It was a mere few lines but it made John feel more than he had done in the year since he'd last seen him. He was frightened of the influence Buck had on his actions and emotions, like this man over a thousand miles away could tell him to drop to his knees and lower his head and he would do exactly that.

No matter how much it terrified John however, he knew he wouldn't stay away. He was gone the next day.

# Chapter 2: Part Two: It's a Sin, Pet Shop Boys

Chapter Summary

> John arrives in sparse, dusty Casper. Marge welcomes him with open arms.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John

The journey across the country to Gale is longer than he expects, and it takes him a few days as he stops off to eat and rest and sleep. As eager as John was to return to Gale, he didn't have it in him to force himself awake. It's likely civilian life has drained him of all energy, that rather than feel rested a drowsiness constantly hung about him and he was always wanting for more sleep. Perhaps his diet had grown poor and he drank too much. Maybe his haunted dreams were the cause. Nonetheless, John must stop and sleep a few times along the way.

He brought with him only the bare essentials: a few hygiene products, a week's worth of clothes and Buck's letter stashed in his front pocket still smelling of aftershave. It was fading ever since it had been opened, the figure of Gale in John's mind drizzling out with it. It made him feel like he was going insane again, like he was trapped and there was no way out, but instead of suffocating him to death and John squirming against it, he was wearing himself down as he inched closer to Buck like it was the right thing for him; John was content to die if it be by Buck's hand.

The breathlessness of the drive couldn't be made up for with the radio and fading smells though, and John grew restless. Since it was Buck, he knew it to be a slow sexual aggravation growing that would pull him to a bar out in the middle of nowhere where young men lined the bathrooms and he could whisk one of them away for an hour or two. In reality, John felt sick to do so because he had grown up a good Catholic and was an honourable soldier. He hated the idea of anyone doing anything against their true will. In the end, he couldn't go through with it, but the man - or, rather, the boy since he was so young - was in his room and expecting a payment.

“What do you mean you can’t do this? You don’t even have to do anything. Here, let me.” The boy motioned to undo John’s trousers for him, but not before he jumped back.

“No, really, I mean it. I can’t.”

“Why? Got a wife or something?”

“No,” John said quickly, “What’s your name?”

“Peter.”

“I’m John.”

“Nice to meet you John. Are you gonna take your pants off or shall I?”

“Listen, I already told you-“

The boy, Peter, sighed heavily. He was slight and blonde, a young pretty face John was sure got made fun of a lot living in the Midwest.

“And I told you, you don’t have to do anything, John. You’re in good hands.”

When Peter tried touching John again, he was almost compelled to let it happen, but then he thought he might cry and did anything that might stop that, like seize Peter by the collar and pull him threateningly close. For a moment John thought he still felt a sob dangerously close to coming out. But he was practiced and reeled the emotion in again easily.

“Peter,” John spoke into his ear, “Peter, I’m sorry, but I don’t want you to do this.” He then let go and stepped back.

“Why ask me here if you didn’t want sucking off? A total waste of my time. And money.” The boy dashed him a black look and turned to the door.

“Wait, I’ll pay you. I’ll give you double what you normally charge. Whatever you want. Just, don’t go. If I stay here by myself I’ll go nuts.”

The boy looked at John diminishingly, as though he were a pathetic little boy asking to stay the night in his mother’s bed, haunted by wild imaginings, by wild nothings; like he could see himself in the third perspective, he guessed it was a befitting look for his sorry state. Peter climbed into the left side of the bed then and pulled back the covers

for John to get in also.

John lay on his back with Peter on his side, eyes glued to John's face. "Why would you go nuts?" The boy asks, "The war? You see things you can't ever forget? Like dead bodies?"

"I know I'm not the only one who came out the war more messed than I went in. And I'm not shocked it changed me probably forever. It just scares me this is it."

"This being, what, normal life?"

"Yeah, normal life. Buying groceries and making coffee, school or a job, whatever."

"And sex. There's that, too. With whoever you want."

John almost scoffs, and the boy pulls a face. "What? Too ashamed to be with a man even if you want to?"

"No, no. I've had my fair share of feeling guilty about that. It's not like that, not with any man, just one single man I can't."

"Fell for a straight?"

John turns his head to look at Peter. His eyes are dark brown, pooled with exhaustion and a familiar staleness.

John smiles, "Yeah."

"Happens to the best of us."

"I even went to his wedding. Best man and everything. I thought, you know, I thought if maybe I could show him how good I could be, he'd want me too, if he could see the attractive parts as well as all the other parts. That suddenly he'd see me for the man I really am and fall in love with me even if I am all messed. If maybe he could see me not as Major Egan but, as John. I'm not sure he even saw me at all."

"Look, you can't get hung on him forever. He ain't gonna wait for you. He's probably got a kid by now." John's stomach lurched at that. "Picket fences and everything. You can't mourn him like there was possibility. There was never any possibility."

"I'm actually on my way to see him. He sent me a letter asking to come down and stay. Said he and the wife wanted to know how I was."

“That’s got to be the most tragic thing I ever heard. Are you seriously gonna go see him? I tell you, I can’t even be in the same room as the straight boy I once said I loved. Gives me goosebumps just thinking of that kind of a nightmare.”

John turns to face the ceiling again. He thinks of how he wouldn’t have survived the camp without Gale, the March, the exhausting journey home, all of it, he wouldn’t have lasted if not for Buck. If he can go stay with him for a short time, to appease his wishes at his meagre discomfort, John will do so because he can’t ever repay Buck for saving his life over and over again.

John rises and fishes one hundred dollars from his wallet and hands it to the boy.

“Thank you, I’ll be alright.”

Peter looks at him wide eyed and takes the money, dresses himself and puts a hand to the door handle to leave. Before he does so, he turns to John.

“Since this is the night of questions, you think there’ll ever be a time people like us can live normal? Out in the open and everything?”

“Don’t have a clue. But whatever happens, you keep safe. Don’t let it all get to you. When that happens, there ain’t no going back to before it did.”

Peter pauses again before he opens the door, a familiar scene, someone ready to leave at a moment’s notice who can’t seem to bring themself to. In the end, he does leave though, always managing to find a way out that door.

“You know, if I was your straight friend, I’d dump my wife and kids to run away with you in a heartbeat. You’ve got nice broad shoulders.”

*

When John arrives in Casper, he marvels at all the things that made up Gale’s hometown, like the shops and restaurants, a cinema and a few bars. It seemed impossible to John that a place as average and unexciting as here gave birth to such a man as Buck. He eyes the people he passes, notices it is in fact early Sunday and they are coming from the church like schools of fish squirming through a reef, only more colourless. He imagines Buck does not visit it often. He checks again the address written on the letter and tries to navigate the

foreign town without embarrassing himself so much.

Gale's home is slightly battered but just as suited as anywhere else for living, with paint peeling in places and the front lawn overgrown considerably. There was a truck pulled into the driveway, so at least someone was home. John was not so much nervous as he was terrified; there was much that could change in a year, perhaps Gale was not the same as he once was, maybe he is the one who had changed too much for them to fit like they had done before.

The decision of when to leave the car was taken from him though, because there he was, standing on the porch, a thick smile as beautiful as John remembered him to be. Maybe the dark circles under his eyes had never truly gone since the stalag, but it took no amount of his handsomeness away. John wasn't breathless at the sight since it was so familiar; all was as it should be.

"Johnny Egan," Gale called to him, unrestrained smile dazzling in the morning light, "How you been, major?"

A hand was pointedly stretched out for John to shake, and he looked down at it for a moment, then laughed. He wrapped his arms around Gale in the tightest embrace since his mother welcomed him home. Gale laughed breathily in his ear and against his cheek, holding him just as tight.

"Been good. Been doing okay. Hanging on and such. And you," He smiles and sweeps his eyes across the length of him, "You look good, Buck."

"Ha, haven't heard that in a while."

"No one call you Buck out here?"

"No one in Casper went to war with me. Except you now."

"Well, is it nice to just be Gale again?"

"Not as much as it was to be Buck." Gale admits, "Anyway, come on in and make yourself at home. I'll get your things for you."

John smiles wide at him again, almost smug, because, as he should have known, Buck was the loveliest man in the whole world and nothing was out of place.

"John! It's great to see you," Marge says to him from behind a kitchen

counter, “How’ve things been? Settling back in well?”

“After about a year, some things stay hard, but yeah, been trying my best.”

She dries off her hands and comes over to give him a hug also. He’s surprised at the sudden contact, since he and Marge weren’t very close and she had decidedly always been Gale’s he had not once laid a hand on her until now. Maybe that she was married she had no worry of things like that anymore.

“That’s good to hear.” She said, her voice warm and remarkably deep for a woman’s, in a tone unmistakably sultry, just like her husband’s. “I’m glad you came to stay.”

In all his frustrations, the most infuriating was Marge, simply because she was the most beautiful woman he had ever met, and, naturally, she was brilliant in everything that mattered. In a similar manner to Buck, Marge could captivate an entire room with just the movement of her feet across from one end to the other. No matter how hard he tried there was no cursing her name as his natural enemy in being Gale’s wife, because he understood all too well that if his heart didn’t belong to her husband, he too would have vied for her hand in marriage.

“Yeah, me too.”

“John,” Gale said from behind, holding up his one bag, half empty, “You thinking of staying only about a day or two? What is this?”

“Oh, I wasn’t sure how long you’d be having me. Didn’t want to intrude too much.”

“Oh nonsense, John. Can stay as long as you like. As long as Gale is your friend, then you’re mine too, and always welcome here.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay! You need to wash up. Gale get his room all sorted and John bathroom’s right up there and straight ahead.”

John couldn’t help himself but smile wide enough to split his face open at her forceful kindness. It reminded him much of his own mother.

In the bathroom, the properly first quiet moment since he slept in that

motel since the radio accompanied him the rest of the drive, John could hardly keep himself from sobbing. It was hard to comprehend that everything had been real, that Gale really had married Marge, that they were living together somewhere and Gale existed out here apart from Buck. The emotion he is wracked with isn't necessarily one of perilous despair but rather of simple magnitude; when he watched Buck drive away that night of his wedding, John's world seemed to stop, and now it was beginning to start up again, slowly, slowly, colour was returning to the sights of his life.

Rather than sob however, John quietly sniffles in the Clevens' bathroom, body convulsing silently in practiced heaves, heat bursting from his skin all over through his clothes and filling the room. Was this it, all there was left for him? Crying in Gale's bathroom because he couldn't have him, or rather, because Gale wouldn't have him? John wasn't sure which was worse, he isn't sure he cares much. He thinks he could die here, be mummified and concealed in the privacy of this locked room, stay preserved in his current state, that it would reflect how he'd feel forever, hunched over and silent; his bones ached and his muscles shivered from disuse, he was more tired than he can ever remember being; is he dying? Gale was the most wonderful man in the world, and his wife was even sweeter, so why did John hate them both so profusely? He thought he could never hate either Marge or Gale. He felt as though he was marked for death, like being here would kill him. He would die for Gale.

Marge served them lunch and then gave John a brief tour of the house so he wouldn't get lost. He didn't look into Gale and Marge's room, fearful of the contents. The realm of married relationships was so very far from what he was used to that just that simple fact of it startled him. He would be staying in the spare room, a plain empty room with white sheets and nothing personal, not even anything chucked in for storing. In all, the house didn't look real, almost too clean to be properly lived in, or maybe this was just how proper married adults organised their home.

Then, Marge stepped out to meet a friend for a favour and get some shopping done. She hugged John again before leaving, telling him how truly glad she was that he had come, that Gale was really looking forward to his visit. He kissed her cheek and thanked her profusely, telling her how beautiful her home was.

John was left alone with Gale then, and before he could think of anything else, he slumped against him and flung his arms around him again, like he still couldn't believe Gale was really there beside him.

“I’ve missed you,” He said quietly against Gale’s cheek, and he held onto him for as long as deemed appropriate.

“Yeah it’s real good to see you. You’ve no idea what it’s like out here. Bored out of my mind.”

The quiet admission feels dirty and inappropriate somehow, like John knowing the true contents of Gale’s mind was something akin to staring at his naked body. He did in fact think Casper was boring, and it filled John to know it.

John’s hands linger against Gale’s sides, keeping himself close to his body. Holding his waist, he mindlessly traces the scar across his cheek, slowly, slowly, feeling Gale tighten underneath his fingers, he can’t think to let go and separate them with a few steps back. A thick knot forms in John’s chest and he can barely breathe, but his lungs take in the air and oxygen pumps to his brain, and he still stands there, hands all over Gale when they really shouldn’t be.

Gale doesn’t force him off and instead he merely stands there too, watching John closely. His facial muscles are slack but every other part is visibly tense; is he terrified that John is coming onto him, or merely confused, does he think it natural to touch his friend this way.

“I’m sorry I never wrote,” John says finally, quieter than he knew to be, and Gale makes a sound in acknowledgment. An overwhelming desire to cry filled John’s body, “How you been holding up?”

With John’s hand still on his face tracing the lines of his features, “It’s been hard. I feel like I’m dying every day,” John feels Gale shift underneath him, like just saying as much was hard, “Even though it’s quiet and it’s good.”

“After everything we saw-“

“I just, I go to school and I come home and I wake up and go back to bed and I’m still dying out here, John.”

John pulls Gale forward, clutches his face in his hands, wraps his huge frame around him in an attempt to shelter him from the feeling. He was familiar enough with it himself to know how painful it was, and especially for Buck. First and foremost, Buck was, just as John was, a pilot. He might have flown a bus, might have been shot down, might have married the girl and bought the picket fence himself, but he wasn’t cut out for this life, and John knew it to be so.

“I’m sorry, Buck,” John couldn’t help but cry. Tears welled but, luckily, didn’t spill. “I’m sorry I left you so long.”

He was talking like they were already lovers, like he had a duty to protect and love Gale. Maybe he did, and they both knew that he did, but it was still nonsense, no matter how right it felt.

Suddenly, Gale forced himself out of John’s hold, put hands on his hips and held his head down, like perhaps he was just caught masturbating.

“Can I, uh, can I offer you something to drink?”

John sniffled, and pretended to be unaware of the fact that he had just been on the verge of sobbing his guts right out of his body, wiped at his nose and pulled a hand through his hair. “Nah, what is this, Buck? Come on, you room service now? I’m fine, and, you know, I bet you wouldn’t have what I was looking for anyway.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Do what?”

“You know what I mean: always making everything a joke, taking it like it’s nothing. You don’t gotta plug yourself up like that.”

John thought he might be sick, but he wouldn’t let the bile rise up past his throat and out his mouth so he swallowed it again and it seared his throat like he was swallowing a cup of gasoline. His eyes watered. Gale put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, and then he was gone, up the stairs to the bathroom or wherever. In all the years he lived with Gale, fought and drank with him, not once had he let himself embrace him so they faced each other; he had got his fill in other, more elaborate ways, hanging off the edge of Buck like a schoolboy, or rather like a child clinging to his parent, pinching and pulling like a babe sticking its fingers wherever it reached. Gale had been like a toy before and now, in his kitchen, back to real life again, he was married and a full, proper man to lean against and to hold.

## Marge

Now that John had been staying for a week or so, Marge finally felt as though the stage lights were off her for a moment. Gale seemed so entirely preoccupied with John that he paid her no mind, even going

so far as to ask her to not cook one evening so that they might go out to eat instead.

She hadn't been so aware before of how much Gale's thoughts perforated her own, how she minded his every thought and opinion. What might he say; what does he expect; how does he like it; does he like me? Gale ran around in her head far more than she cared to admit, sprinting about like an insect with a thousand legs and beady eyes to watch her close. She wanted to ask if he felt the same way about her, and was unafraid to ask, but figured he didn't, for what man would stay with such a woman and not turn on her?

She started to wake to find Gale was already up and making breakfast, serving her and John cups of coffee, setting an itinerary for the day so they were all occupied, the sorts of things she was so used to performing. The duty to man the home had been taken from her, and she let it go gladly and without any struggle; there was little she enjoyed about the job.

Gale remained as fervently affectionate as he was before John's arrival, perhaps even more so somehow. He would greet her with a morning kiss, tell her she was beautiful all hours of the day, hold her hand and wrap his arms around her. It seemed to become a far more conscious activity, that he would recognise it had been a long time since they touched and would suddenly put his hands all over her. She didn't dare say she minded, because Gale was handsome and she loved him, but there was no doubt in her mind that the change had occurred due to John's presence in their home.

She had promised John he could stay for as long as he liked, expecting a week's stay at the most, so halfway through the second week of his visit, Marge asked Gale how much longer he was expected to stay.

"However long he wants really. I ain't got nothing against him being here. Do you?"

"No not at all, course I don't mind, I meant what I said about him being my friend too and all that. I just didn't expect it to be this long is all."

John was in the bathroom, showering, and she hoped their voices wouldn't carry. She truthfully had nothing against John's staying, yet she couldn't help feeling like it had put their life on hold, that John had interrupted something between them. A week before his arrival they had discussed kids; they hadn't had proper, normal sex since

then. Gale had expressed he didn't want kids while he was still at school and Marge said she understood. It seemed though that even if he did appear to want children before then, it would have been put on hold the moment John's truck rumbled into the driveway.

"Look, Marge," Gale took her hands in his own then and looked up at her from where he was sitting at the kitchen table, "I'm really sorry if I've been a little distracted lately. Just, with John here I never seem to get a moment alone and when I do I usually want it alone. I'm sorry."

"No need to be apologising, honey," She was truthfully shocked he had even noticed, "I'm glad he's here, really, I mean you're so much more lively than before. I think it's done wonders just seeing him."

She was right of course, Gale was constantly beaming with joy and unashamedly so, laughing easier and smiling more, his voice never croaked from disuse and he left the house for more than just college now. It put her in a good mood too, and had come to accept that perhaps John might be a permanent addition to their lives, that maybe they'd be all the better off for it because he was just so agreeable and apparently possessed the ability to strengthen Gale with a single poorly made joke.

*

John wanted to see a picture, confessing he hadn't been since being back home. He apparently wasn't very big on them before the war, but perhaps they made them better now. He remembers enjoying Vivian Leigh once or twice, but not much else.

"I been plenty times while you boys were away, just about the only thing to do some days. Life got hard being all alone over here. Sometimes a picture all you need to just get you out of your own head."

Marge had lived through the war with her mother, younger brother, older sister and her three children. Her father had passed some time ago around the time her sister married, so her brother-in-law had been supporting them. Of course, she was away with Gale up until the war, ruining her social reputation with each night stayed at his place.

Out in the Wyoming country, there had been little enough work to feed them all before the country had plummeted all its efforts into the war, so Gale came home to a thinner Marge, more worn out and irritable than before. No matter how overjoyed she was to be back in his arms, the severe years of war had reached her too. He apologised

profusely those first few weeks leading up to their wedding, because he had not been there to help her.

She worked as a waitress sometimes when the place could afford to pay her. She would use what little earnings she made to occasionally visit the theatre and catch a picture. Now Gale was home, she didn't go anywhere without his say so, not because he was overbearing and ridiculous, but she was his wife now and who would cook for them if she was out at the theatre catching the latest Cary Grant picture? She was thrilled to be going again.

The film they picked had been some kind of action western, and it was not a very busy screening. The theatre was small but the screen was huge enough to make her gasp still. She couldn't help imagining herself up there, centre stage and beaming, a real star, with fans and awards. She was by far pretty enough to make it, but was unsure if her accent wouldn't slow her down considerably; no one liked a thick-headed hillbilly no matter how blonde her hair was.

John and herself sat on either side of Gale and when it eventually started she wrapped one of Gale's arms around her, cloaking herself with his larger frame. She fiddled with his fingers and stroked the back of his hand, twisting his ring and her own round and round throughout the film. At some point she released Gale of her hold and sat up straight, feeling a pain come on in her neck. She didn't take her eyes off the screen a second and missed not a millisecond of the picture, but still managed to take sudden notice of John's long, gangly arm stretched back behind Gale, his wrist and hand curled to reach and touch the back of his neck, his fingers stroking the skin and hair there. It appeared mindless, like maybe they weren't even aware of it, like rather than affectionate perhaps it was simply repetitive and soothing. Marge was suddenly very conscious of how effortless John and Gale were, how much she worked each and every day to love Gale, how mindful she was of his every whim so that he might still love her by the end of the night.

She forced every thought unrelated to the events of the film far out from her mind until it was finished, not wanting to spoil her own night because she couldn't help but think. The end came and Marge was crying by the time the credits rolled, the wistful music all around her in the room and she felt incredibly alone in the world, and glad to be; she was thrilled to be alive and with two people she loved that were healthy and alive to see the end of the picture.

When she turned to Gale as the lights came on, he put a hand to her

face and wiped the tears away, saying, “Ah, honey, come here.” Bringing her face into his chest and pulling his hands through her hair, her tears soaked the front of his shirt and he smiled down at her. Her hands had found the back of his neck, where John had been touching him, and it felt no different.

“So, John, did you like that one?” She asked wetly, laughing a little.

He laughed a bit himself and told her, “Yeah, it was beautiful.”

She apologised for her state and they left for a bar to eat something and have a few drinks. Although Gale still abstained from smoking, drinking and dancing, Marge didn’t.

“John, I take it you’ll dance with me tonight, since this one never wants to. Hardly been down here since he got back. Likes to get to bed at nine o’clock. Ten if I’m lucky. Wouldn’t be surprised if he started knitting by the fireplace.”

“Oh, Marge, you poor girl! Being married to such an old fart, must be terrible for a beautiful young woman like yourself. Why don’t you just run away with me instead?” She couldn’t help but laugh, bawdy and loud because there was no need to try courting John.

“Waited all these years to just steal her from me?” Gale asks, “What kind of friend are you?”

“I was giving you a chance to prove yourself, but you’ve failed horribly, Buck. If you’re not careful, she’ll be mine in no time.”

“Yeah, I really just might be! If you don’t dance with me tonight, Gale, I’m gonna take that ring right off your finger and give it to this here good gentleman who knows how to treat a lady right.”

Marge’s arms are looped through both of theirs, their looming figures pressing against her on either side. She feels special with them beside her, like maybe they were guarding her, as if she were important enough for that. She drifts out from the conversation and allows them to chat, always making herself small for their comfort since she knew they had missed each other more dearly than they cared to admit. A year had made them both terribly lonely she knew. A year had filled her with anxieties she hadn’t known could exist in a living person.

She was out of that damned house of her mother’s, away from the contempt of her sister and her commanding little brother who treated her more like a pet than a person. She existed in that house rather

than as a daughter and sister but as a slut undeservedly and ungratefully receiving the patronage of a generous distant relation. She told her mother years ago she would marry Gale so long as he would have her, so long as he made it back home alive. Both had been made true and they were married the month he returned. Her family refused to attend, saying they would not condone the sinful, unlawful union of two godless people. Marge had just been glad her brother-in-law didn't hit her after all those nights she stayed with Gale, how she moved across the country to stay with him night after night right up until he left for England. She was out of that house and married to Gale, so she at first couldn't understand why she felt so amazingly unfulfilled.

It had struck her when she was talking to Edith, a schoolfriend who had known Gale just as long as she herself had. Edith had married before the war straight out of school and he luckily returned to her from the war. In the time she knew Edith's husband, Jack, Marge had hated the man since he treated her friend with half the respect she deserved, thrashing about in their house and screaming at her unashamedly, Edith would describe to her sometimes. There would famously be a great crash or a scream, followed by Edith running out to the bar down the road, then Jack would come out looking mortified, Jack who chased her inside, who got on his knees and cried for her to come back home, baby. It was bizarre, and it was lovely; it was unbelievable but they were madly in love and it's why Edith never ran away from him.

"Listen, Marge," She'd told her, "You thought marrying Gale would give you some unfounded freedom, but I bet you wouldn't know freedom if it suckered you right in the face."

Edith was a hodgepodge woman whose hair was always a mess and sticking up in places from sweat or grease, her clothes old and crumpled. All her life she had been on the larger side, muscled arms and a protruding stomach, and Jack said he liked her that way; it was more of a fair fight when he threw punches then, he would joke.

"I tell you Marge, you're looking at it all the wrong way. Until you live for yourself you ain't gonna know how to. Trading your mother for Gale ain't gonna cut your chains. They ain't made of paper."

That night Marge went to get herself a drink and cry a little. By the time she got home, the smell was all off her and she looked well enough that he couldn't tell anything was the matter, even if he had looked up from his textbook. She never held it against him; his

disinterest pleased her because it meant she wasn't doing anything wrong.

She did end up dancing with John after two or so drinks, falling against him for she could never hold her alcohol well. She laughed absurdly at his rude jokes and leaned against his wide frame like he really was her husband instead of Gale. She would look over to find Gale's eyes trained on them, cola in hand and leaning against the bar. She waved and John winked, Gale nodded in response, but otherwise remained unperturbed by their closeness, as if Marge could never fall for John and that John would never dream of trying anything. Gale was completely content to watch his wife and best friend fondle each other over their clothes as they danced. Marge was unsurprised by it.

Chapter End Notes

Some notes ?¿
1. Edith and Jack may be reoccurring characters and are kinda based on Stella and Stanley from a streetcar named desire ! Pls watch the 1951 movie with Marlon Brando and Vivian Leigh it's fantastic !!
2. I've picked Wyoming as the setting for this fic not just because Gale is obviously from there but I've been reading the short story collection close range by Annie Proulx, which includes brokeback mountain, but really it portrays Wyoming as such an interesting and otherworldly place so I really wanted to delve into that part of Gale's and Marge's characters ! There's a massive chance some things are portrayed wrong about the place and I'm super sorry if it irks you I'm but a young lass from London !
Anyways ! Thanks sm for reading !! Pls stay tuned for part 3, which is gonna be a long one I think and pretty much all from Gale's pov so !! Excited abt this next one !

# Chapter 3: Part Three: Heavydirtysoul, Twenty One Pilots

Chapter Summary

> John is closer than he's ever been, and yet Gale cannot bring himself to touch him. He feels grimy and can't get the dirt out of his skin, almost as though he was made from it; dust and dirt that makes him so uncomfortably heavy.

Chapter Notes

> First off wanna thank people for their comments ! It's lovely knowing people are enjoying this ! I've had a blast writing it since I can't get Buck and Bucky out of my head no matter what, so please please enjoy as much as I did :))
>
> Warning: this chapter does include some mild mentions of domestic violence and sexual assault

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gale

In truth, Gale hated Casper. He wasn't sure if anyone had been able to tell, perhaps John, but he adored his time as a USAAF pilot far more than he knew he should have. England's consistency, its reliable rainfall, the small slight ladies who minded their manners and the mere permanence of civilisation comforted him in his years away. When he thinks of that place, it reminds him of everything Wyoming is not: comfortable.

Severe weather, hard people set in their old ways, the loose sand and the filth that easily sets in your bones and pulls you down; Wyoming's entire population was thirty times smaller than London's, and it killed Gale to know it. Sparse settlements of people, ranches hundreds of miles from each other, and in the middle of it all was Casper, full of bars and whorehouses, a town of little morality and a poor disposition. Even though it should have attracted more people with the jobs and the shops and schools, Casper never got any bigger.

He hadn't always lived in Casper, but it's where he lost his father and found Marge, so he counts it as his birthplace all the same. His father, a gambling man, naturally had bet on his chances that perhaps Gale

did in fact not have any dignity or sensibility, and pushed and pushed until he was staring down a fully loaded .45 revolver. Gale had caught wind a few years later that he had crashed while driving drunk and been killed on impact. If maybe his father had raised a girl and not a boy, he might have lived in that house forever and died an old man, but Gale was no pansy, he knew if he never stood up to him his mother would never step outside again.

His mother, a once loud, bawdy woman had the very life sucked right out from her through the years Gale had grown up. Her hair was an ashy blonde like his own, frizzy and curled, and her features slight, unlike the heaviness of his father's. It was obvious he had taken after her as opposed to him, yet he could never reconcile that his eyes, cold, deep blue eyes like the surface of Neptune the loneliest planet in the solar system, were of his father, for his mother's eyes were a solid brown that dazzled bronze in the sunlight.

His father took much on chance, and took things as they came, the very essence of the country, of dead end Wyoming. He had grown up a rancher and not known much else outside of his little farmhand work. When he moved to Casper in search of more work, he couldn't shift the ranching out of himself, and refused to change. His father touched a lot, shaking hands and patting backs, pinching cheeks and holding onto anything that breathed. He was the same when he was angry, violently swatting at or slapping Gale. He never used a belt or anything else, preferring the feel of his own skin clattering against Gale's. He was as quick to curse and strike as he had been to hope and love.

Gale refused to walk into bars as long as he was old enough to make his own decisions, abstained from alcohol and smoking and hardly ever looked in the direction of women. He had watched his father be driven mad from it all, from the drink and the gambling, watched him fondle girls and visit brothels; he watched it all mess with his head and he was no longer a human man but an animal with a diminishing value. It was as simple as that: Gale hadn't been allowed to enjoy anything living in Casper, it was a hard place where the people had been driven mad by the lack of attention from the rest of the world.

Gale hadn't been allowed to attend school as a teenager, because his father hardly worked and his mother's part-time waitress job could never have been enough. He did a lot of odd jobs, fixing things, trucking, sometimes moving out to ranches for weeks at a time to help lonely old men with no sons. When he did that, he often returned to a cold and irritable mother, driven petulant by the frustration of having

Gale leave her for so long. She had grown to become a sort of woman-child to him, an indecent perversion where he took care of her rather than the other way around. She would often say things to him that she knew would hurt him, make him upset so that he would back down, tell him how easy it was to pop her head off with one bullet of the same .45 revolver he pointed at his father. It was not the only gun in the house but she would use his very own gun. It took time, but eventually he got rid of it and she could threaten him no more.

Because he didn't go to school very often, Gale had grown hard himself and had very few friends, perhaps not even one. He had known Marge, grew up living on the same street as her, watched her walking to school and coming home just as he had been from whatever weekday job he had managed to pull. The last thing it took for him to notice was how alike his mother she was, practically screaming when she laughed and winking at any boy who looked her way. She was beautiful, that much was easy to see, just as he was, and as soon as Gale started to look at her, she was looking back, and smiling even.

When she let him touch her, Gale found he couldn't get his hands off her, pawing at every clothed bit of her body as soon as they were alone again, scooping up her hair in bunches and twisting it between his fingers, cupping her breasts and fingering her all hours of his spare time. They'd say that they were young and in love but neither of them were really that young and they hardly loved each other all the way back then; they were desperately trying to get out of Casper, and tried prying into each other's bodies to do that, consuming one another and filling each other up.

Marge was the only person Gale regularly spoke to before basic training in Texas. It was the perfect opportunity to leave, and Marge chased him across the country, so he had all he needed from Casper really. His mother could hardly argue with a war so he was out finally. He hadn't been aware just how insane Casper had driven him until he had left. Texas immediately had been leagues better, and, of course, there was John, his best friend and the latest object of his desires.

Gale was not a lusty man, he did not covet pleasure so much as he did the intimacy and acceptance of sex; he believed sex and love indistinguishable because what greater love is there than to allow one the feel of their body, the very thing that permitted them existence. For Gale, touching a body is the same as touching a soul. So, when John had officially been named a friend in Gale's mind and began

hanging off him, pulling at him, pinching him, there was a desperate urge to resist, because what man behaved such a way to another man? But Gale was trying to force the cowboy out of himself, and by letting John in, with his easy smile and baseball obsession, it was easier than it should have been.

The looming feeling leftover from the realisation towards the end of the war that he wanted to fuck John had been worse for Gale to reconcile than his being shot down in October 1943. There was an underlying sense of exaltation, of sheer thrill, because it was something dangerous and undiscovered, and that had been the most terrifying part for him. The feeling grew more taut and weakened over the weeks in the stalag, becoming a mere fact of life as opposed to what it really was: a revelation of a devastating magnitude. The dreams came and they came over and over until they were shipping out back home and he was saying goodbye to John, on his way home to Marge, his fiancé, and still they continued there.

They were back in Casper and Gale felt the sudden urge to run away again, but he never did. His mother was just as he left her, except perhaps her worsened health; war wasn't easy on anybody and she clearly hadn't been eating well enough. She died a few months later, from a heart attack the doctor said. Gale was unsurprised and felt nothing. He had nightmares often, not violent or vocal ones, but he cowered under the sheets, clutching himself and covered in sweat, Marge told him. He was ashamed of himself, and John would not leave him alone, not even when he made love to his wife, when he tried to get her pregnant once. Gale felt wrung out by this old place and sold his father's house to move further out to the outer rims of Casper. There was nowhere else to go except just a small way away, for he had settled easy back into old habits and even if he hated the place he knew it well.

The University of Wyoming in Casper was an unusual place of refuge Gale found himself hiding out in because it was seldom attended to by the people of Wyoming in general, yet Gale was a proper gentleman with medals, so why not certificates? He had always enjoyed the orderliness of school and was drawn to the interplanetary physics course they offered because stars were as close to the sky as he could get down on the ground, and how he enjoyed the sky. During the war, there was hardly a concern for his own life for Gale was practically the most capable flyer in the whole 8th Air Force, so that even when he was shot down there was an insurance that his entire crew would survive getting to the ground. Gale prided himself on his flying; there was a freedom in being good at it since there was no fear and he could

soak in the clouds, in the minus fifty degree temperatures and in the crashes and thuds of flak from every other which way.

When he looks now up at the sky and sees the clouds gathering and remembers himself thousands of feet up among them, reminds himself of all the slight cuts and gashes the marks of shrapnel just missed, he cannot help but want to go higher, further up, higher than he can imagine, to the stars, because maybe then he will finally be far enough away for it to not matter so much what he wears, how he speaks, what he eats, who he spends time with, whether he is a good man or not, whether he is really a man at all. If he can't go there physically he will study the place of his dreams so he might lose himself entirely to it and become something else, a reflection of his desires as opposed to a person who repeatedly fails to act on them.

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Like Icarus, Gale fell from the sky in his tincan bird, except he was not a boy with waxwork wings and instead a man fighting a war; he seemed to only be made aware of that fact once he was inside of Stalag Luft III, a prisoner to more than just German guards. The sky was, unremarkably, the same as it had been before, as if Gale thought it would darken without him in it, like maybe he alone had the power to brighten the Earth. Returning from his first mission, Gale's idea of what this war had been was stripped from him and bloodied, and yet he too had foolishly believed in the myth of Buck Cleven, that he was as invincible as the Hundredth deemed he was, as John deemed him. Tall tales and mythical stories only ever had any sense to them if your best friend told them too. Engine down; feather it; another; feather it; until One Engine Cleven, hardier than the rest, cold as the air outside the walls of his plane. No Engine Cleven, blocked up by myth and legend, silent as the grave he sails by, beautiful, like maybe he isn't real and instead a fantasy man, made up to encourage the real men to head straight to their doom. Cannons to the right; canons to the left; cannons right in front of them; riding into the jaws of death, the noble 100th believe they will come home. If Gale must die he guessed the Bloody Hundredth would sob for him, but in the end he would be lost in the thousands already dead and waiting for him. Death didn't scare him as much as the impermanence of his existence did.

His home in Wyoming felt incredibly impermanent, like everything else in this harsh country. The weather made an effort to rid of anything in its path and if you wandered ten miles out of town there would be nothing to suggest people ever lived there. As unfamiliar as England was and as nasty as the reason for his being there, Gale

couldn't help but feel comforted by the muggy weather, the heavy stone buildings, the ancient, firm hold of civilisation. An entire village couldn't be wiped from the face of the Earth in a single night's storm here; the rain was awful, yes, but it was just water.

In Wyoming, he was fading, and he let John know as much when he finally came by to stay. And then he let him know again and again until John was begging to take him someplace else away from Casper, not even back home to Manitowoc, maybe just the two of them could get away, like they were already lovers. Gale shrivelled to think of John that way.

It was hard to live beside John and not reach to touch him. To walk past the bathroom and hear him showering, to know John was stark naked in his very own bathroom, Gale could get off on just the sound of the running water.

There was a heat to their every word now, since that first day when John hung off Gale, called him Buck over and over and apologised. Gale never told him off for the way he touched him that afternoon, and so he touched him over and over like that, quiet and gentle, almost polite if it weren't so outrageous. A touch to his neck, to his thigh, to his waist, to his bicep sometimes. Sometimes John couldn't get away with it in the light of day and it was seamless the way he could be clawing to get inside him one moment and just standing there the next.

Sometimes it wasn't the things John did to him, but merely John on his own that would set Gale off in prickles all the way from the tips of his ears to the ends of his feet. Once, a stick of gum that John blew up bubbles with, bursting and splattering all across his lips. His tongue would come out to try cleaning the mess, the gum strung thin across his teeth and lips, John's mouth moving, moving, strong jaw working over the piece of gum lazily.

"Do I still got some?" He would ask, watching Gale's eyes clinging to his mouth.

"No, you're good," Comes Gale's answer, forcing himself to look away. John's mouth would break open into a smile. Gale always thought his smile was particularly ugly. It always showed the imperfections of his face, the slight gaps between some of his teeth, the wrinkles around his eyes and along his forehead, how very small his eyes could get so he hardly looked human at all and instead maybe like a big bug; a bug the size of a man; a creature out of a nightmare, John comes crawling

into Gale's wildest fantasies. He isn't very handsome, but Gale doesn't seem to think so.

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It'll be a late night where Marge is already in bed, the radio is on but neither of them are listening to it and John is itching to move. It's cold when Gale steps outside to join him while he smokes. Dark has been settled for hours but Casper is all lit up under the stars.

"You really still don't smoke? Or drink?" John asks, begging for conversation. There is something on his mind but there's no telling what since Gale was always too frightened to ask. "When's the last time you smoke, Buck?"

"I don't know, maybe when I was still a boy. About twelve or something."

"Twelve? Mama never catch you at it?"

"Catch me at it? She damn near handed me a light."

"Well, my own still hates to see me smoking them." He peered at the cigarette in his hands and offered it to Gale, who reliably rejected it.

It had been a few nights since John danced with Marge in the crowded bar and Gale couldn't help get the image out of his mind. He had seen them, the two people he loved most in the world pressed so close they could have been one person. He saw how well they moved together and thought that maybe if he disappeared then perhaps they could have been happy. He was not incapable of seeing his inadequacies as both a husband and friend, understanding that he had failed Marge and John equally and that maybe the one simple favour he could do by them was to just leave them be.

He watched Marge as she laughed and John too as he whispered jokes to her. He saw them and two halves of himself looked back; one part hot blooded cowboy, and the other a shrivelled man born in the sky. There was one side of him that longed for comfort in a man's arms even if it might never get it, that dared to be small enough to be held. It was also the part that had pointed a loaded gun in his father's face, in a child's face, the part that had seen too much to not be vicious. The part of him that made him beautiful like Marge was beautiful; the mystic half from Wyoming. In the other lay crude jokes and music, drinking for the fun of it and not because your father did, there was civility, normalcy, there lay a sense of adventure in Gale, in John - in

Gale's John, in the John that had crawled into Gale's dreams and into his heart, between his ribs and around his lungs.

He saw Marge and her simple love for John plainly, thought if there could ever be a time their places could swap he wished very much for it to be then. John, too, in the place Gale belonged, holding Marge like he loved her. Knowing John, he did love her, with his whole heart and being because John loved everything that so much as breathed so that there was hardly any room left for himself when all the pieces were counted up at the end. Wrung out dry by wonder and beauty, John's heart was so full of the things he admired Gale asked again, *how is it that I'm his friend?* For Gale's heart was twisted and bleeding and broken; he could not love any more than three people. Marge, naturally, John, his closest friend, and his father, whose deliverance he coveted more than anything. He wondered that if John or Marge might die before him, would they too haunt his waking thoughts like his father did five or six years on.

Then, their dancing became more clingy and forceful as the tempo picked up, they became more shadowed in the dim light of the pub, and they seemed to move closer still. And Gale's thoughts turned dirty. Every part of both of them, he wanted to touch them, be touched by them, wanted to be in them, be swallowed whole by them so they might shelter him in their stomachs. A gross, fictitious fantasy that made the cola he was drinking want to come back up him. In what world was a man allowed to want shelter, what was he running from.

Now, John was saying it was about time he got to bed, with nothing else left to say between them. Gale let him go, watched as he stamped out his cigarette and walked back inside. Gale didn't want him to go, so to keep him by his side he guessed he would have to start talking. Maybe John didn't want to share his thoughts, but it didn't mean Gale couldn't. He hated how quiet he had become again, so far away from the comfort of the never-ending stream of John's mouth.

"Say, John, you wanta get out for a while?"

"Out? Where to?"

"I know someplace nice. Not a lot of people go there. What do you say?"

Gale was taking him to a drive in cinema he used to visit often as a child. Without a vehicle, he would usually lie on the field and just

listen to the sounds of the picture. This was the first time he had taken someone else with him and the first time he had been since returning from war. It was more rundown than Gale remembered but it was cheap and he wasn't intending to watch the film anyway. He parks up near the back, switches off the engine and waits. It takes some time, but eventually Gale manages to say something.

"When I was a kid," He started, and John whipped his head around to watch Gale's lips as they moved in the dark. "I used to come out here and think about what I'll do when I get out of Casper. My father, you know, he'd be out drinking till god knows when. My mother, she would always stay up waiting for him, making sure he made it home safe. Yeah, he always got in safe. But when he was in, you can probably guess, home wasn't so safe anymore."

He thought it would be harder to speak, but when the first few words came out it was easy. John didn't make a move to say anything just yet, knowing there was more coming.

"So, I'd stay here a bit, after school or work, then go home to try, I don't know what I thought, try and protect her maybe? You know, he wasn't always bad. Sometimes - sometimes when he had this light in his eyes, you could just feel it. And you knew you'd believe him no matter what he said or did. Not just because he was my father but because he could make you feel a million bucks if he looked at you right. But then he'd look at you wrong and you knew you weren't shit. He started looking at me like that more and more often and, eventually I got him out of that house and away from us and I didn't need to come out here no more. And when I stopped, it was like, all of a sudden, I knew I was never getting out of here. The moment I stopped needing a reason to dream."

"You hated Casper that much?"

"I guess I did. I wanted to be here as much as the next person. Which is to say, not too much."

"Tell me about your mother."

"I remember vaguely a time she was happy and healthy, she was a tough woman. She looked a lot like me, except her eyes, they were a maybe darkish brown. She was my best friend for a long time, the only person who'd done right by me. Up till my father left nothing could break her, not even his nastiest looks or hits. She would protect me a lot when I was little so I did the same when I got bigger. I think

she blamed me for how lonely she felt when he left. Even if he was slowly killing her I think she wanted him back."

The expression on John's face was, rather than of pity like Gale might have expected, was of sheer interest. He wanted Gale to talk more and more until his throat was burning dry, until the sun came up.

"What about Marge? She never make you want to stay?"

Gale scoffed lightly, "She wanted out more bad than me. No, her father died a while back, and she lived all crowded with her whole sister's family, brother, everybody in one small house. It was killing her faster than anything else. It's why she came to Texas with me. She jumped at the chance to get out even if it meant her folks would hate her for it."

"How long you known her now?"

"A long time. I seen her about ever since I was a little kid but I only talked to her when we was in high school. We'd walk there together in the mornings when we could. She was the sweetest little thing," He huffed a small laugh and his face cracked into a wide smile, "Used to write me these letters written in code. I'd go to her sometimes and tell her I couldn't figure it out just so she would explain it to me. Even when I already figured it out. I think she knew that. Maybe I'll ask her if she knew. Smart as a whip, she is. I'll bet she knew."

He felt as though he couldn't stop the words from coming, couldn't help his mouth but move it. Maybe if he talked more his muscles wouldn't twist up so much and harden and keep him from acting on his thoughts.

"Yeah, Marge is great." John croaked, his voice a little dry, "She wasn't even there and she helped you more than I ever could at the camp. Kept you all," He motioned with his hands straight ahead of him, "Focused, collected."

"We don't have to talk about the stalag, John. I didn't come here to talk about war."

"It's a good a thing as any to talk about. It's the only reason we're friends."

"What is it, John? What do you wanta tell me?"His throat closed up at the question, but it came out all the same like he wanted.

“You call me John a lot more than I call you Gale. Why is that?”

“I didn’t used to, back in the air force. It was easier that way, all the guys called you Bucky anyway. Everyone only called me Buck because you did. It’s your name for me. I like John. Maybe Johnny if I’m feeling it. But that isn’t what you really wanted to say, is it?”

“No, it’s not. But I can’t say what that is right now. I still don’t know enough about you, *Gale.*” John wore a cheeky smile, a familiar face, “But you’ve given me enough for now, we should get back.”

As he drove, the chill night air swathed Gale’s features and he felt light as a feather. He was not entirely sure taking John someplace so sentimental and just talking was the right thing to do. He didn’t want to ruin whatever this feeling was, this feeling like maybe he was okay with his insignificance, so he tried to keep his mind silent.

John’s movements, however slight, were loud beside Gale, like he could feel his jitteriness fill the space between them and diffuse through his own skin so that he too felt restless. He knew he wouldn’t sleep tonight, even if he had college early tomorrow.

When they arrived, John reached over and brought his hand through Gale’s dishevelled hair, “See you tomorrow, cowboy.” He said with a smile, and Gale was left in the car to watch him enter the house and climb the stairs to bed. He moved inside very slowly himself, slowly up the stairs and to his own bed, like the cathartic release of talking about nothing in particular had relaxed his muscles so much that they barely worked. Exhaustion overwhelmed his body but his mind wouldn’t quiet, the word *cowboy* ringing throughout over and over.

*

He had the urge to follow John into the guest room instead of joining Marge in his own. He thought she would have been asleep but it seemed they woke her up. He kissed her goodnight even though it was already morning and collapsed down beside her, his body feeling heavy.

It came as no surprise to Gale that he dreamt that night since his mind was so active. There were flashes of many things, of being in the sky, of prison, he thought there was a scene of him being held not just by either John or Marge but by the both of them. He felt warm and breathless when he woke up, as though he had been performing the activities he was imagining in his sleep: bodies rubbing against one another, hands pulled through hair, the fumble of clothes pulled

hurriedly over your head; then, it had felt like he couldn't move, forced to just watch as John and Marge kept on, their lips on each other, his two very separate lives coming together. Maybe it had been a sex dream until his father materialised and shot a single bullet through both their heads, a German army issue pistol in hand. When he jumped up to defend himself the man was no longer his father and instead now an SS guard.

It was the first dream Gale woke up screaming from. He whimpered when he woke and realised he was in Marge's arms.

"Honey you're okay, you're okay. No one's gonna let you get hurt here, you're home. Look this is your home, Gale." She pointed to her vanity, to the light hanging above them, out the window. "Look, blue skies, not grey ones. Blue."

He saw the blue she was talking about through the window and then looked back to her. He brought himself to smile meekly up at her but couldn't help from shivering, even wrapped warmly in her arms.

"Let me get you a glass of water. I'll be back in just a second."

He didn't want her to leave him just yet but he couldn't bring himself to say anything and he did nothing but run his hand across her empty, cold side of the bed. He looked up and saw John poking his head around the corner. Gale was relieved to no longer be alone.

"Everything alright in here?"

"Yeah, all good. Just, not a very nice dream."

"Oh, right. I'm somewhat familiar."

"You get them too?"

"Who doesn't, after what we saw. All those years, day in day out. Just waiting for our turn to bite the bullet. And then when we did, more than a year in prison, that wasn't so pretty either."

Gale scoffed lightly. He liked to hear John speak. "When you arrived in the camp, you told us about how you were carted around. On a train first, through villages and everything else. I ain't never told you how sorry I am that all happened to you."

"It's okay, none of it was your fault."

“I know, but, still, I’m sorry.” Gale picked at the sheets, looked down away from John so he could stand to keep talking. “When you arrived, they ever ask you anything, or threaten you, the guards I mean.” He managed with great difficulty to look up again at John, “Didn’t do nothing to you?”

John shifted his weight from one side to the other. He had inched further into the room as they talked. Sleep still stuck to the corners of his eyes and Gale thought he looked handsome and homely that way, with his hair all stuck up and a thick morning voice. It was something he seldom cherished, to see John so vulnerable.

“I mean they banged me up a bit. Privilege of the rank I guess. But, they asked me about you, too. Course at this point I thought you were still dead. He was trying to get a rise out of me or something, thought I’d give him some kind of information if I got angry enough. Apparently, we’re such good friends even the goddamn son of a bitch krauts knew.” He smiled, and his eyes went small again. “What about you?”

“It was Marge,” Gale said, “They threatened her real bad. It was awful. I don’t think I ever told anyone what they said to me then.” The rank smell of the cell was coming back as he spoke, the cold sweat soaked through his clothes, itchy scalp and dirt so thick under his fingernails.

“It’s enough, you know.”

“What?”

“To want to tell someone even if you can’t. It’s enough. It means as much as telling them does. We all find a way.”

John only wore a vest and underwear, which is why, for modesty’s sake, he had made sure Marge was out of the way before he came in. His armpit hair was overgrown and you could see it peeking through even when his arms were by his sides. Gale found John’s body hair attractive. He wanted very badly to curl up in his arms, to trace the hair he could never grow on his own chest and stomach. John wouldn’t come closer no matter how much Gale seemed to will it. He wanted comfort from anything that moved and Marge was god knows where with that sordid glass of water.

“If only we could just read each other’s minds.” Gale said.

“Sometimes I think we can. You know me better than anyone so if

someone could, it'd have to be you."

"Is Marge anywhere there?"

"No. Do you want me to get her for you?"

"No, no." Heat filled Gale's stomach and blood rushed to his ears. "Could you come in, and, shut the door, will you?"

The dream still swirled in his head, the prison and the tincan plane he used to fight so valiantly in, blown up friends and baby boys with their piss frozen against their skin, ice-burns and skin melting off faces, heads caved in and brains spewing out of them. Men with no legs, no arms or missing teeth or eyes, some with all their parts but their minds rattled instead. He thinks of the ones he never saw what they looked like in the end, because they died hundreds of miles away from him, starving in other camps or crashing to the ground in their forts. Gale knows John mourns them too, every day, they were his boys too after all.

John did as he was asked and stood painfully still at the end of Gale's bed. He wouldn't ask him to climb in even if he wanted nothing more.

"What is it Buck? It's only me, what do you have to be so afraid of."

He remembered the way John called him Gale, then *cowboy,* and how he had wanted to know more about Gale. It felt like an endless chasm lay between them and no matter how close they stood to one another it would not be enough to close it. Gale wanted to grab hold of either end and slam it shut himself, so it could feel like how it was in Texas; he couldn't figure out a way how. He hoped greatly to be able to close it one day, because it was killing them both, Gale knew, this immeasurable distance between them.

In the end, all Gale could muster was a feeble, "I feel so lonely out here John, I don't know what to do with myself." His head hung, Gale was embarrassed of himself and his pathetic attempt to salvage what he had done to them. He thinks tears prickled in his eyes.

"Come on, major, let's get you up and dressed. Don't you got to get to school?" John was pulling Gale off the bed and to his feet and when he felt John's hand on his skin, Gale seemed to jump to life. Mortified at his state, he hurriedly dressed himself, talking aimlessly about one of his lecturers. John watched him tentatively, like he might start yelling and thrashing about again at any moment. Gale thought he might do, too.

“You’re okay, Buck. You’re good.”

Gale nodded and John left to his own room. It took a few seconds before Marge reappeared with that water, which he gulped down quickly, kissed her goodbye and told her to take John out while the weather was so nice; he was gone before anyone else could say another word.

Marge

She targets him at breakfast. It’s common knowledge that a creature’s defences are relaxed when eating. Everything would be made far easier if Gale didn’t resist much. Marge knew it was hard for him to discuss some things, and especially of the war, she had married a quiet man after all, she knew that well enough, but that wouldn’t do for her.

She watched his face drop and the colour drain as she talked. It seemed something his men had unlikely seen, a face of horror exclusively reserved for those who had likely inflicted the damage themselves, for the eyes of Marge and the stalag guards only. She held his hands and told him no matter what he said it would be okay.

She sees so much pass through him, behind his eyes she can see the light of his existence flickering on and off as he tried to express himself appropriately. His muscles were tight and his eyebrows pulled together in a tight knot that wrinkled his smooth, full face. He was beautiful even like this, even in difficulty. She wondered what he had looked like in the camp, in the cockpit, in the mess hall, parts of him she would never know, parts that made up so much. The scars across his cheeks were almost entirely faded by now; reminders of what she would never know, because she was a woman, because she was not there.

He stutters and his accent is stronger than usual, “I’m sorry, I ain’t got no good answer to any of that. John, he means more to me than anyone can know,” his voice was low and thick, “He’s my best friend, I might not’ve made it out a there if it weren’t for him.” It becomes too much then and he folds over himself in an instant, dropping over his lap and tearing his hands from Marge’s grip to clutch his face in them. His breaths become thicker and more laboured and he rubs at his face fiercely as if he was trying to pull it right off and become somebody else, like he hated to be Gale or Buck.

Marge waited silently for him to finish. It ultimately confirmed all assumptions she had made but she wanted to hear him say as much, because he needed to for himself, to confirm for himself more than her that he loved John like he should love her.

“I let him touch me like that because I liked to feel his skin on mine.” He looks more terrified than anything else and Marge is filled with the desire to curl him up and swallow him whole so he might stay safe inside her stomach. “I thought if I could just watch you two for a minute I’d let myself imagine our places swapped.” A sob threatens to burst from his throat but she sees him physically retract it. He folds his body against her so his head lies in her lap. Eyes glossy with tears he whispers into her skirt, “I’d let John do just about anything to me, I think, and, Marge, it terrifies me.”

His frame shakes below her and he sobs like a child into her lap, tears streaking her clothing just as hers had done so the night at the theatre. She pulls a hand through his hair in the same manner he had done and her heart burns for him.

Then, “Look at me, crying like a baby over something like this. I’m sorry Marge, you never should’ve married me I’m no good. How am I supposed to be your husband like this? In love with my best friend? What am I thinking? Better off rotting in a German prison camp than safe and sound, a fairy, making the two people I care the most about in the whole goddamn world suffer.”

She slapped him hard across the face and he barely flinched for her strength was only slight, but his eyes shot wide, “Don’t you dare, Gale. Don’t you dare say that. You ain’t gonna sit here and pretend anyone is suffering because of you. I ain’t suffering, this ain’t making me suffer.”

His breath was fast and so was hers, a different kind of anger flowing through her than he had expected. Is that really what he thought of her, a prejudiced and vicious woman who would rather he dead than simply in love.

“But, you married a queer, Marge. What are you gonna do? That ain’t gonna just go away. Who’d want a husband like that. That kinda husband, he ought a just go, make everything a whole lot easier.”

“I’ll just be his wife. Because what else is there besides that? Because I love him, even if I don’t want to sleep with him no more or have his kids.”

“Marge, I don’t know, I couldn’t. You can’t. We gotta get a divorce. Can marry someone else,” He pulled a hand through her hair, “You’re still as beautiful as the day I met you, guys would throw themselves at you if you weren’t already spoken for.”

She felt anger simmering through her, a quiet burn in her chest and stomach, because of course that is what Gale’s mind jumped to first. She was ashamed of him for thinking so, for thinking that the way she looked still mattered at all.

“You still don’t get it. Look, I ain’t just gonna marry again. Is that what you think is all I’m good for? Marrying?”

“That isn’t-“

“No, but it is,” She grabbed hold of his hands again, firm as she could, and she forced him to look at her, in her eyes. “You think that just because you don’t love me my life is suddenly ending, hell, Gale I didn’t know that you were god. What makes you think I want somebody in love with me?”

He almost whimpered again in her lap, like when he woke from that dream, quivering and biting his lip pathetically.

“I know you loved him a long time. You been writing me all those letters and been in love with him all that time. I know it. I been knowing it, too. I ain’t stupid,” She laughed, couldn’t help it. Relief washed over her. The stage lights flicked off and the crowd was ushered out forever, the stage turned decrepit from seconds of disuse; there wouldn’t be another show. “Who cares what anyone says? I thought you hated religion anyway?”

Gale manages to laugh small and shy, like he was still terrified, like a little boy in the face of something much larger than himself. Marge is compelled to comfort him like he is, but he had straightened himself and stopped crying by now even though there is much more to cry for. Like when he has a nightmare, he tries pretending it didn’t happen, that he is just fine. Marge usually let him walk it off if that’s how he preferred it, but she took his hands again this time and made him look her in the face.

“Oh, Marge, you’re so beautiful, I never should’ve gotten you into this mess, it ain’t fair on you.”

“Then I wouldn’t have known you, wouldn’t have married you and had that big blowout wedding,” Her eyes watered and glistened in the

morning light, made her sparkle and shine rather than ruin her, “Never would’ve bought this place and moved out of that goddamn house of my mother’s. Whatever you think, I’m glad you did. I don’t know where I’d be by now if you’d not married me.”

He hung his head again, ashamed once more at himself, “This, thing, you don’t think it’s too unnatural, indecent?” He can hardly get the words out and looks as though with each word he was deflating and losing strength. For his sake, she hoped John would sleep a while longer since the shame and embarrassment would be too much for him. She understood the desperate need to appear invincible even if it was still just John.

“I think it’s beautiful, Gale, beautiful that anybody loves anybody, it’s why we do the things we do; if you didn’t love him then who’d help you make it out that war? If your heart really belonged to me, I don’t think we’d be any as happy as we are.”

“But, who’s gonna love you, Marge? Don’t you need somebody?”

“I already got my somebody enough, in you and in John, too. I might not be in love with you, but that don’t mean I don’t still love you.”

“You can’t stay married to me, I won’t let you. It’s just not fair on you.” Marge doesn’t answer and it looks like he can’t handle the silence, so he continues, “How can you be so calm? You married a queer, Marge, ain’t the fact of it enough, let alone me inviting him here like I didn’t know exactly what I was doing. I wrote to him so I could see him because I dream of him almost every damn night. I wake up in bed next to *you* wet from a dream about *him* like some pathetic little twelve year old. God, it’s horrible even just saying it.”

Marge held him again, Gale breaking down suddenly against her once more. She knew what great strength it took from him to be this open with her, how hard each sentence is to speak. If asked about her own deepest fears, she would likely struggle just the same. It wasn’t as simple as to speak it is to resolve it, Marge knew that too. There was a lot ahead of them to make it all be okay and Marge felt ill with excitement at the prospect of it. The theatre building along with all the staff and equipment was falling to pieces and you couldn’t rebuild it even if you tried, because Marge wouldn’t let you. She wouldn’t have to be his wife the way she was horrified to be, she would be Gale’s forever in a way that made her feel all the more loved than before. More than his wife, she was glad to be his friend.

“You know, my mother, back when we started seeing each other, way before any of this, she told me it was horrible when I stayed the night with you at your place, told me how sinful I was, that I ain’t no longer no good respectable girl. And I tell you, I’d have shrivelled at the thought if I hadn’t loved you half as much as I did. I’d think to myself, standing right in front of her getting all shouted at, that, you know what, I think I’m gonna marry this boy, so how comes it matter any? Nothing mattered to me more than being with you, being close to you, waking up full of the smell of you. And not just because I loved you like I’d die for you, but, because Gale, I knew I’d much rather be known as a harlot and stay true to what I know, than to let anybody stop me just so I could be a decent respectable girl, just so the people here in Casper were satisfied with my performance. Course I never wanted to upset nobody. But if it’s between that and living a lie, smiling when I ain’t happy, crying when I ain’t sad, then I sure as hell don’t mind hurting a few people along the way, because you don’t owe your life to nobody, even the person you love, the girl you marry, the parents who birthed you. It’s your life Gale Cleven, and I ain’t gonna take it from you.”

He pulled her to sit on his lap then and buried his face in her neck, sobbing still, more so just the sounds and movement than any actual crying. His body was unimaginably warm, his face bursting against her skin, cheeks full and red, eyes swollen and wetted. She thought he might be the bravest person she knew, and felt her body physically wanting to burst open and cover him in her skin, to stretch and bleed to comfort him, like perhaps she could take him in and create him anew so he might suffer less.

Marge lifted his head so she could look into his eyes again, “Can I ask you something?” He nodded. “Do you think you could want what we’ve had this past year with John?”

She thought he might cry again, but instead he answered, voice as still as he could manage, “I think that maybe yeah, maybe I’d like that.” He ran some fingers across her face and through her hair, “God, Marge, I hate to say it, but I’m scared. What’ll I do? My feelings ain’t even half the problem. What if he doesn’t feel the same, I’m completely sure he won’t. John a queer? Don’t think so.” He almost laughed, “Marge, Marge, tell me what to do. If things had been different, you know, if I didn’t, you know, what’d we be doing right now?”

“Well, I guess John wouldn’t be in our guest room, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. I probably would’ve cooked you breakfast,

did your laundry, got your lunch ready for college, gone back to the bedroom to find you still fast asleep. I'd probably wake you gently and you'd smile to see me. Hand you your coffee and then back to work for me, back to nothing. If things had been different, Gale, I don't think it'd have worked. At least not for long enough."

"Was I really that awful?"

"You were better than you could know. But still, this life ain't good enough for me. I barely lived yet and I'm already supposed to just hand you my life? I'm not one to just sit there and take it."

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you so much for reading hope you enjoyed this chapter and the sort of development ?? Next one is gonna be more John centred and boy oh boy have I got some feelings about John and his loneliness ! Excited to hopefully break some hearts ;))

# Chapter 4: Part Four: Burning Love, Elvis Presley

Chapter Summary

Sometimes it feels delightful to burn alive.

Chapter Notes

Hi hi !! Welcome backkkk

Just a disclaimer that this chapter has more graphic details of sexual assault than the last time, but they remain mild. Stay safe reading everyone and please enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John

The first time John ever slept in a double bed he had taken a lonesome girl to bed, promising to love her like her ex-boyfriend had just a few days prior. It had been no lie. He stripped himself with more haste than was necessary yet barely took any clothes off her because he didn't want her to feel used when she really had been; he loved her for a few hours and never saw her again when morning came, what matter was it that she cared nothing for him? John can still conjure an image of her, just like he could all the men and women he had slept with, as many as that was. Maybe not their names or how they sounded when he was inside them, but their faces, John never forgot a face. She had been a tubby young woman with mussed brown hair and red skin who squinted likely because she couldn't afford eyeglasses. He doesn't remember but she spoke slow and loud and melancholy plumed off her in great dusty bouts. She had moaned loudly into his shoulder and fell asleep almost as soon as they were done. She wouldn't know but he kissed her goodnight as sincerely as though they were married.

He liked to play house when he had sex, because nothing else had come closer to perfect natural human domesticity for him. He liked to pretend, kissing his lovers on their brows and stroking their hair like they were really his. He said their names over and over throughout, like he had known them his whole life, just to pretend like he had something which he did not.

The home John grew up in was not a cold one, but there was a distinct lack of warmth. It was lonely in Manitowoc by the sea, where strong winds drowned out whole conversations and the smell of salt was in everything you did. Ships went in and out at all hours of the day and John loved to watch them sail away until they were small as a speck against the horizon. There was a serenity in the ocean that made it monstrous and John felt his smallness grow with each billowing wave; so much vastness, such an enormous body, and not one person who truly belonged to it. The ocean was not like land, you could not claim it, make it your own and build your home in amongst it.

His father worked a meagre job building ships and later submarines for the war effort. His long hours and small pay meant there was not a lot of time for his children, and John grew contemptuous over the years; he distinctly remembered an instance of throwing a fit and his father slapping him hard across the face for the first and only time. His father was a tough man, tall and broad and dark, just like John was. They shared a nose and mouth, but not much else in the face, his father having a more square head and jaw, wide-set and thick. Their conversations were brief and undeveloped, because John could never forgive his father for being unknown to him as a boy.

John had been as his father should have been to him to his sister, Kathy so she grew to take more of a liking to their father. His sister was the single-most important person in John's life. She was pretty like their mother had been, with a sternness in her manners, grown hard like her brother by his teachings, and almost a touch too masculine, she was outspoken and intelligent. Kathy had told John to go to the air when his parents told him to stay with the sea for the war, and he would never forget it. He loved her like he would his own child.

Being a family of the ocean, the natural choice was for John to become a naval officer, like his father had been during the first war, but he hated to do as his father had and if for nothing else John wanted to run away from his home; what better place to run to than the sky, what place further from the meagreness of human life.

John left Manitowoc hoping to find nothing. There was an underlying certainty in him that was inclined to believe nothing would change. He would fuck girls like he had in Wisconsin, he would drink as he had in Wisconsin, and he would have friends but none that he loved. It was hotter in Texas than he had expected and he never got used to the sweat that permanently clung to everything. He seemed to miss

the ocean and strong winds, but would never say as much.

John left Manitowoc and he found Gale. He was a quiet, small and shy boy when they met in basic training, more youthful but not more beautiful, his hair more blonde and with a thicker accent. Since being back in Wyoming, Gale's accent had grown and returned to as it had been; John was grateful because it was extremely attractive to him. Gale, quickly renamed Buck, had thankfully taken a liking to John too, and they were inseparable from the beginning. It had occurred just as Gale liked to describe it, with John calling out, Buck this, Buck that, Buck can you help me tie my shoes, except he liked to argue he never asked for help to fly his plane.

He was the first man John had ever fallen for and therefore special, because every man since had been a poor imitation of Buck in John's mind. It was unfair of him to expect strangers to compare to Buck, but he still did it in his head anyway. John hadn't known he was queer, or half-queer he sometimes told himself instead, until he met Buck. There was no muddled confusion as to if maybe he just really liked Buck as a friend before figuring out he wanted to love him like a wife, it was instantaneous and John came upon it so naturally, as though it was in his mind, body and spirit to love Gale, and to want to fuck him. He didn't like to think of Gale as the only thing his life revolved around even if it was true.

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John had hated himself for what he had done that first afternoon he arrived in Buck's home, but he couldn't bring himself to stop repeating it. He wanted to think perhaps Buck enjoyed the lingering touches, the closeness, the small sweet words and knowing looks; it had not been much different at Thorpe Abbotts except that it was more real. War had put both their realities on hold, kept them from their families and normalcy, and when they touched ground in the states again, everything dreamlike had come to an end and, to John, the colour drained instantly. His adventure was over. Now, in Gale's home in Casper, Wyoming, tugs of clothing and hands all over faces were solemn and heavy rather than light and fitful, like maybe here in this place it could get them killed.

He could feel Buck wearing down across tables and beside him on the sofa, and he too was breaking, small fragments of himself cracking off and rolling down his sides like a cliff side. Sometimes at night tears rolled down his cheeks and he corroded all the faster for it. It was small in Gale's guest bedroom, with nothing but a few pieces of

clothes strewn about, the only personal item being a book and the letter Gale sent. He was a poor boy so he was used to single beds. He had slept in worse places, like in amongst a pile of rotting corpses, or beside a woman whose dead husband haunted her every movement so he felt like he might have had sex with Pawel and not Paulina.

She had suggested they were maybe drinking his spirit but that was impossible since she had engulfed it whole and was clutching onto it with every fibre of her being. She was in love with her husband more than she knew and John had known she was going to leave him that afternoon because of it. Who would stay another night with John when he paled so severely in comparison to the one you really loved? Nothing could bring Pawel back to her, she knew that better than anyone else.

He himself felt hollow at night, the sheets cold and dirty because he was cold and dirty, like he had been in the camp. John tried to not cry most nights. It was difficult and he hardly succeeded, but he was quiet so it was like it never happened. Images and dreams didn't consist of anything in particular, just feelings or sensations that would spring on him in the dark leaving him wanting for the warmth of another's body.

He liked to pretend Buck was in the bed with him, holding him tightly so he wouldn't freeze, pretending, pretending, John couldn't stop pretending. He played imaginary sequences in his mind to explain the lumps of pain all across his body and liked to picture a blizzard over his head under the covers so he wouldn't be ashamed at the way he shivered. When his body was sore and he could barely walk to the bathroom he liked to imagine he was a hero who'd been shot and was crawling the few last metres out of danger, keeping his guts from spilling out with one hand; sometimes he was a retired baseball player, who's fanatic signature swing had knocked a disc in his back out of place forcing him to give up the game early.

John was a patchwork man made of a million different stories and scenes, all of which were made up to comfort the smallness that grew larger by the day within him, smallness that made him cower in his room, afraid of shapes in the dark. The shapes that haunted him indeed looked like Paulina, and Marge and Buck, and Biddick too and his family, of Bubbles and all the male prostitutes he had spent nights with.

He rehearsed conversations with Buck in bed, confessing what he would never dare to say aloud. He thought about if God could see him

masturbating next door to the man he pictured when he did it, was he disappointed in John? Sometimes he talked to Buck while he did it, telling him how much he loved him, how much he would give for a single night with him. He couldn't bring himself to be embarrassed by it since it was just Buck.

The cold, frigid emptiness of his heart that longed to touch Buck was made up of such intricate sincerity, and with such an immensity, that it was burning him alive, and John was spent at the end of each night, crashing down to sleep, but he was unbearably restless at night because who could sleep when you felt your skin was on fire?

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John could feel Buck's increasing jitteriness especially because he was so talkative, more so than he ever had been. He talked of his life before the air force often, trying to share with John the parts of him that had previously been separate. He was grateful to Buck for it, he felt they had grown closer despite the full year spent apart. There were more bad memories than John liked to hear, but there was no shortage of good ones, that usually involved Marge and her friends. They returned to the drive-in cinema once or twice more since that first time and they had lain side by side on the grass just like Gale said he used to. These small pieces of him were just that, small pieces, but it was filling John up slowly, slowly, and his pretend sequences began to contain more truth to them with each conversation.

They sat around for breakfast as usual, falling easily into a routine where Marge cooked for her boys and John cooked for her. Gale was likely better at it but it was his penance for being allowed to stay in her home as long as he had. There was an easiness to their mornings, before the day really set in and they could pretend they weren't what they were, before the Wyoming's dusty quiet turned unsettling. John found himself spending more and more time with Marge as Gale kept running away to hide in his books and college library. Today, however, Gale proudly announces at breakfast that he is free today, for the whole day, and that the weather was beautiful.

"You know what we could do," Gale said, "We should head on down to the Alcova Reservoir, it'll be nice."

Marge expressed immediate excitement and told John how much he would love it, said she would bring some friends and make a party of it, sure Edith and Jack would be free.

“It might be a little busy since the weather, but we’ll be alright.” Gale said, taking from Marge a list of things to buy before they went. She had ordered the pair of them to go out and get some foodstuffs, sunscreen and the like, marvelling at how empty her house suddenly was.

“Hey, who’s this Edith and Jack, friends of yours? How come I haven’t met them yet?”

“They’re more Marge’s friends than mine. Known Edith since high school, Jack’s her husband. I think he was navy during the war but I don’t know.”

“What, you don’t like them?”

“I don’t know how to explain it, but they’re not very traditional. Bit odd, I think. Marge and Edith are thick as thieves, always have been. But Jack, I don’t know, an unsettling fella.”

John pulled a face, “How so?”

“He’s always got this scowl on his face, even when he’s sweet talking Edith, like it’s painful being there to him. Not to mention they’re both psychotic.”

“What?”

“Yeah, Marge is always telling me how he’s always banging about in their house, sometimes he claps right across the face if he’s feeling it, can always see the bruise right there in plain sight. Horrible man. But they say they’re in love so.”

“What kinda girl stays with a guy like that? I mean, come on honey, it’s not rocket science. If a guy treats you like that, he’s got to go.”

“I guess some just take whatever they can get, even if it’s indecent like that.”

John felt almost silly for gossiping the way they were, like schoolgirls. It was new to hear Buck talk badly about someone else, and interesting to see him chat mindlessly. They both weren’t majors anymore, their words didn’t carry as much weight as they once had. There was a lightness they had craved during the war, a simplicity that had been stolen from them.

But then, they were only friends because of the war; it was the most

severe event in modern history, and John felt guilty for being grateful to it for it handed him Buck since they would never have met organically. A cowboy and sailor dealt on the opposite ends of the earth, but two pilots belonged together in the sky. John thanked God to know Buck as he did.

“What about you Buck?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you ever be with someone you know you shouldn’t?” John asked, stepping slowly through the aisles, basket in hand, picking whatever he liked off the shelves.

“Not romantically speaking, no,” Gale was clutching onto the list, trying to keep the shopping as minimal and close to Marge’s needs as possible. Against John’s persistence, he was failing. “I only ever been with Marge, and she’s sweet as a peach. But there was this kid I knew a while back. Brock Kappa.”

“Yeah?”

“He was all into the drugs scene, high on something or other all the time. He was a rodeo cowboy, too. Used to work with him sometimes on the oil fields. And I got to know him. He had an unusual haircut, wore funny clothes that was all tight, you know the type.”

John hummed, watching Gale talk. He liked that now he was no longer in the service his hair was mostly unkempt, that his shirts weren’t buttoned all the way, that he rolled his sleeves up; he no longer looked like a poster boy, was no longer mythic, simply Buck Cleven as he had been in the womb, a man and nothing more. He appeared more real and more obtainable.

“We’d go out together sometimes. Once he tried teaching me to bull-ride, I swear to god never been more terrified in my life of anything. A bull ain’t no joke, John, a thousand pounds and if it gets on you, pop your head open just like that,” Gale snapped his fingers, “and then nothing.”

“Don’t some do it for a job?”

“Oh, yeah, hell it’s shit money but if you’re good enough it’s alright. Never met a bull-rider with all his bones in the right place though.”

John winced. He couldn’t picture Buck on a bull, and didn’t want to

imagine his skull crushed beneath one of those beasts.

“Anyway, Brock Kappa, he was just an awful guy. No manners, badmouthed girls, treated his folks like they weren’t shit, and it’d be fair if they weren’t, but his folks were good to him, nice enough you know. We’d be hanging out, at the bar or wherever there were girls, and if one was talking to me and not him, he’d start telling them I was this massive queer, that girls aren’t my thing at all, that they ought to leave me alone and talk to him instead.”

John raised his eyebrows at Gale. To hear something like that come out of Gale’s mouth made him shiver. Any mention of such things made his fingers tingle with shock and anxiety. He was always more conscious of himself. He had never known another queer person except the ones he had sex with, and he wasn’t always sure he was managing to keep calm when the topic inevitably came up.

“He’d say a load of other bullshit, but that, you get killed for that here. Can’t go fooling about it, never. Not even in private. Never know who’s lurking round the corner.”

Gale spoke with a venomous hush, like he was still scared of the accusation. John thought about how many times he might have been called that, with the way his face was. John was unembarrassed about his sexual preferences with himself, content to love men as he did women in his own time, but he knew how furious he still would be at the implication by another.

“What did you do? You beat him up for it?”

“Absolutely fucking nothing. As much as it was nasty he did it, I liked being friends with him, he was funny and, I don’t know, there was just something about him, made me wanta forgive him. Eventually his parents moved out to Texas for something or other, never saw him again.”

“I guess that’s a good thing, he might’ve still been making that joke now if he’d stayed.” There was a momentary silence before John asked, tentatively, “You get called that a lot?”

Gale turned sharply to look at John, who held his breath, afraid he had overstepped a line. And then Gale said, “Not a lot,” He’s speaking slowly, “But, sometimes, feels like everyone’s thinking it. Not a nice feeling, I’ll tell you.”

“Yeah, I can imagine.”

“Bet you ain’t never had trouble like that.”

“No,” John said, “Not much of a topic in Manitowoc.”

“Yeah, well, that kinda thing, follows people around here. You get stuck with that, takes a while to shake it.”

John wanted to ask him more about it, like what he thought of those kinds of people, if he had ever known one, or what would he think if he turned out to be one. Further questions however would only garner suspicion and John didn’t want to risk that. If it was going to come out, it would not be like that, slow and unsure, it would be abrupt and apparent, just like everything else John did.

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There was promise of good food, warm weather and the chance to drink with some fresh company. Gale drove them, with Marge and Edith in the back and John in the passenger seat. Jack was working but would join them later. Gale scoffed under his breath when they were told, “I ain’t never heard of that before. Jack, working?” He said to John. It was easy insulting Jack at every turn with Gale, John liked the way he turned smarmy and brattish like anyone else at any mention of him. He tried pointing it out to poke fun, but Gale played innocent.

The sun filled the air out with a heat so dry it made you thirsty just to breathe it, and you could smell it and feel it reaching inside you. Light flits of breeze made it not so hot but it was enough to make your head itch. John kept forcibly smoothing out his brow, at an age now where he was fearful of wrinkles and he thought too much squinting might do that.

When their things had been placed in a good, neat spot, John grinned wide and said to Gale, “Race you.” Gale was competitive and John knew it.

They rushed to strip down to their underwear, fiddling with buttons and the jangling of belt buckles, their breaths quickened and they couldn’t help but laugh as they watched the other undress. If they had been in a room by themselves with a bed, there would be no mistaking the scene, but here among the grass and dust in front of Marge and Edith it was made innocent, and it had been.

They both dashed to the water and Gale made it there first, feet slapping against the water. John was close behind and hurled his huge

body against Gale's, toppling him over and drowning him. They climbed back out of the water together, rubbing their faces and pushing back soaked hair, laughs lost in the wind and waves.

John couldn't help but notice how Gale dazzled in the sun, how his lean body covered in water shimmered and how much he looked a picture. In the Air Force, Gale had been exemplar, portrayed by all the men as mythic, like he was untouchable, infallible; here, in his homeland, those things might not be true, but he still looked it, still the most beautiful man in the world. Then, rather than an object of his personal sexual desires, John saw Gale as Marge saw him, as he truly existed: a creature which exists to be watched, rather than to expect to receive love from Gale, you worked your life to love him as well as you could because it was more fulfilling to give to him than have him give to you. He was like a beautiful fountain, you threw in your most precious pennies and begged for the smallest sliver of luck, then your wish might come true.

"Anyone ever tell you how perfect your fucking face is?" John splashed water at him, looking annoyed. It was frustrating that he could look as he did while John paled so very severely in comparison.

Gale smiled and winked at him, "Have now."

John patted him on the cheek and wrapped an arm around his shoulders like he used to, gripping him in a headlock. They wrestled in the water until they could hardly breathe and decided to get out to eat.

"You boys done fooling around already?" Marge asks, "Edie says Jack shouldn't be long now, just a heads up." Gale practically groaned. The water loosened him, he was more boyish now than he'd ever been.

"He ain't that bad," Edith said, looking at them both over the top of her sunglasses. She was smoking a cigarette and clutching a book in hand. "You ain't talked much to him, and John here's never even met him."

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The four of them lounge in the sun like cats, talking and laughing, poking fun at each other and telling stories. There comes a time when they have all forgotten about Jack, until he comes crunching along the dirt in his filthy truck. John notices immediately how unbearably attractive he is, like a real movie star, sauntering over in his dirty work clothes.

“Came as soon as I could,” He calls over to them all but looking to Edith only, “Didn’t wanta miss a chance to get a look at my little lady in her bathing suit.”

Edith jumps up and runs to him like a child, giggling all the while. They kiss ruggedly and his large hands are all over her. The three of them look away, half to be polite and the other half because it was just plain uncomfortable to watch. Marge had told them she couldn’t find a way to invite Edith without letting Jack come too.

In the stalag, Gale told John that next time he would set it up right, but he couldn’t help noticing how he still hadn’t done so, that he was alone, the only one missing an other half. Surely, his other half was Buck, since he was Bucky. Amongst these married couples however, they were John and Gale, not amongst boys and barracks they had to leave those childish nicknames behind. But John couldn’t let go of Buck, no matter how much everyone else said Gale.

When Jack and Edith rejoined them he smiled at John and held out a hand, “Jack Bush, Edie’s mon amour, good seeing you.”

“John Egan.”

“Gale’s friend, from the Air Force, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Talk that much about me Buck?”

“Yeah, he’s been missing you like hell, in every other story or something. Feels like I already know you.” Jack’s eyes were so dark they could have been black and his low brows gave him a hard look. He appeared ordinary but John couldn’t help be cautious from everything he had been told.

Just from looking at him, he already somewhat understood Edith’s obsession. He watched Jack slyly, as he undressed and washed the grime off his face and hands, traced the strong lines of his body and saw Edith join him in the water. John noticed how ragged his clothes were all the way down to his underwear, surprised since Edith’s bathing suit looked brand new. He saw Jack pick her up above his head and throw her down into the water as she screeched to be put down. Jack smiled easy in the sun and John couldn’t see how this was the man Gale and Marge were so tentative of.

Time passed and they eventually climbed back into the water. It was colder than before, as the sun rolled down from its height in the sky. Edith tried dragging Jack to join them, but he was in some mood and

refused, called her rude names and pushed her away, said he wanted to be left alone. She sighed like nothing was wrong and they left without him.

Edith climbed onto John's shoulders and Marge onto Gale's, "This means war, Marge, and I ain't going easy on you." Edith was a big woman and if not for the water John might have dropped her. There was hardly any competition since Gale and Marge were so much smaller than the pair of them together. They scrambled in the water until Marge eventually fell off, pulling Gale down with her. Edith cried out in victory and tried waving to Jack, who ignored her. She then slid down John's front and held her arms around his neck and put her legs around his waist so he carried them both in the water.

"Sure your charming husband's not gonna have anything to say about you doing that?"

"Jack? No he doesn't get jealous. Knows I'll always come back to him, even when he breaks a window or whatever else in the house. Marge probably told you all about it. She likes to talk."

"Hey!" Marge called, "I ain't never tell anyone anything they don't need to know. But John's like a brother to me, of course I'm gonna tell him."

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Edith smiled and put her head on John's shoulder so her face was in the crevice of his neck. "How comes it you don't have no gal, John? You're sure nice enough. No sweethearts where you're from?"

"Oh plenty of them, but what good's a sweetheart when I got all this? All a man needs is a couple good friends."

"Really? You don't ever think about wanting a girl for real? Don't want no sweet wife all doting on you John?"

He could feel Gale's eyes watching him from behind Edith, knows he is watching and listening as a caution because he's scared John might lash out. It doesn't feel much like babysitting even though that is likely what it is.

"Course I want a sweetheart, baby, but you can't force something like that," He looks behind her to catch Gale's eye, "Gotta let it happen on its own."

Edith followed John's eyes, glanced behind her and saw Gale and

Marge there, looked back at John then giggled shyly into his neck. “You’re sweet, John. Maybe I should’ve married you instead of that bum over there.”

John laughed and held her close for a moment. Another pretend sequence he couldn’t help but conjure up for himself. “Anybody up for another round?” Edith and Gale swapped so they could play girls against boys and then John had Gale hitched up on his shoulders, his hands clasped around his thighs.

“Sure you’re okay down there, John?” Gale’s hands were on his head trying to keep himself upright.

“Yeah,” He grunted, “you’re light as a feather, Buck.”

Marge lost again but not as quickly. They accused Gale of taking it easy on her. “What a gentleman!” She sputtered as she climbed out of the water again, her loud laughter echoing in the valley. He thought that maybe all three of them were in love with Marge, too, for she was as stunning as her husband, almost even more so because there was no realm in which loving her could be deemed inappropriate or unnatural. Maybe there was a world where John loved Marge as he loved her husband or maybe one where he was free to love them both as he felt he did in this one.

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As the afternoon was turning to evening, they each began pulling their clothes back on and organising the things into the car. Some time before this, Marge managed to pull John aside for a short walk partway around the reservoir. She must have discreetly told Gale to stay put and make light conversation with Jack and Edith.

“John, I wanted to talk to you about something. Before that, I want to let you know that what I said about you being like a brother to me, I meant it. I don’t want you thinking any different. I haven’t known you that long, but I feel I don’t need to.”

Conversations with such a preface can only mean a few things, that Marge means business bringing him out here all alone like she had. He salutes her courage and fortitude to do so.

“I feel the same,” He said, “I really do. You know, all those years Buck telling me all about you, I don’t mean no disrespect, but I’d like to say I do feel as though I really love you, Marge. As a friend, sister, whatever.”

“It means a lot to hear you say that, thank you.”

“So, what’s this all about? Is it you want me gone? I promise no more than a few days, I’ll be out of your’s and Buck’s hair. I feel terrible having showed up as I did. It ain’t fair on you.”

“No please don’t worry about that. It’s lovely having someone else around. Gale and I are both pretty quiet it’s good to have some chatter. It’s that, I couldn’t help overhearing you and Edith talking earlier.”

“Oh?”

“When she was asking about a wife for yourself. Sorry about that, I know she can be a bit forward sometimes.”

“No, she’s great. And I find Jack’s not so awful either. As much as you both hate him.”

“Look I never was any good at beating around the bush.” She stopped walking and John turned to face her. He looked back and found he couldn’t see the others anymore. “You know, sometimes I see the way you and Gale be looking at each other,” His throat shrivelled inside him and a clump formed in his stomach. “I don’t know very many boys so I didn’t think anything of it before. Thought maybe that’s just what war does to friends. See I only known you right before and right after, I ain’t seen the slowness of the changing.” John couldn’t even bring himself to say anything to her, to refute the accusations he knew were coming his way.

“Gale, you know, he cares for you more than you can know. You wouldn’t think it, but he’s a sensitive man. He wouldn’t tell you, he wouldn’t tell you what he really thought. I guess what I’m trying to say is, don’t let fear get the better of you. And don’t think I’m standing in your way. Like I said, you’re like my brother, we’re on the same team.”

“I don’t get it, what are you telling me?”

“Gale probably doesn’t want me telling you this, but we’ve decided to stop seeing each other romantically. We’ll stay married, but I’m not his wife anymore than you are John.”

“But, what about you being sweethearts, all those letters you wrote each other, he wouldn’t shut up about you. How can he just not love you anymore?”

“John, you don’t understand what I’m telling you.” He was sure he did, Gale had cast Marge aside just like that, uncaring of her feelings and the true consequences of saying such things. He was furious with Buck. “John, look at me, listen to me. I’m not his wife any more than you are.” She repeated herself slowly. “His heart is not with me.”

“Oh,” John could feel his eyes watering. He reached to wrap his arms around her and squeeze her into a tight embrace, as he would his little sister. “Are you sure?” There was a quiet understanding between them since Gale shivered awake and, when he asked after her, she shook her head at John and hid beneath the stairs.

“I’m sure.”

Gale

In the time John had returned to him Gale wanted to touch him more and more each day, to feel out his body and be inside him, have his mouth on him. Now, he was as close to naked as he had gotten, and yet all that desire had dissipated. He pulled at John’s huge body and wrestled with him, gripped his arms and wrapped his own around his torso, but with all the innocence of little boys.

Growing up the way he had, raised by his parents, Gale hadn’t much experienced days out like this. He had known nights out at bars and nights in with Marge or a book intimately, uncomfortably so even, but this, laughing and talking playfully, eating sandwiches and not being the only sobre one; it was nice. He hardly remembered the last time he had smiled so much and with such force so that his jaw and cheeks felt raw and used. John was gorgeous in the water, and, finally he had gone more than three hours without a drink. Sun and water did wonders to everyone’s mood, except perhaps Jack’s.

Jack was as gross and awful as he remembered, but couldn’t help admitting perhaps he was handsome. Marge and Edith both agreed on that at least, and he supposed they weren’t wrong. There came a time John and Marge were gone and Gale was left alone with the pair. He was fine to not speak, except it seemed Jack wasn’t. He asked Gale about Marge, about school, how work was treating, and finally about John and the Air Force. It was hard answering the questions without irritating him too much since Gale was trying his best to avoid engaging with an erratic mood of his. Eventually, Edith stepped in and saved him from the conversation.

“Stop interrogating the man, baby, don’t you know he’s not much of a talker.”

“Yeah, well, just trying to be friendly.”

It turned that Edith was asking him things now anyway, talking about kids and families. She talked enough for the pair of them and he was fine just listening. It came to him to ask her then if she would have kids of her own, and now Jack was out of earshot, he wanted to ask what it is that kept them together. He couldn’t fathom how he couldn’t bring himself to be in love with Marge while Edith was madly in love with a man like Jack.

“Actually, we been talking about having kids and all that, but I don’t think I want that yet still. Jack’s a real nice guy where it counts and he said that’s all okay with him. When I’m ready, he says. Most other guys, if they want them, they just put them out, no word from the one pushing the damn things out or anything.”

Gale hummed, “He’s nice where it counts is he?”

“You know, I know Marge plants all these seeds in your minds about my Jack, and she’s right to. He’s insane. Practically an animal. His moods are out of control and he’s lazy like you wouldn’t believe. Doesn’t do anything except drink and play cards and then maybe he’ll come home to me and wanta make love.” Gale winced at the detail and Edith laughed at him.

“So where’s all these nice parts you keep talking about then?”

Her expression softened and she looked down to the ground, bashful like a little girl in love for the very first time, “He’s sweet on me. Says these things like I’m the only girl in the world. He doesn’t have a lot but he gives what he does. Doesn’t take anything for himself. Yeah he smashes things sometimes. Sometimes it’s hard, you know, just getting through the day. He can be rough, and I ain’t easy on him either, I know that. But I know he loves me so much he can hardly stand it. And I feel the same way. He drives me crazy.” She turns to look over at where he’s standing smoking by his truck. He smiles and waves at her and she returns the same. “Nothing’s ever gonna change that.”

Gale pulls a face, like maybe he doesn’t believe her. It’s hard to, when faced with such a perfect situation all you want to do is deny it because it’s not your own. He was jealous of them, and happy for them too.

“Listen to me Gale,” She took his hands in her own and said to him, “Something that feels this right, no matter how wrong it looks, can’t actually be wrong. How it feels.”

*

When it was time to leave, Edith went with Jack and that’s where they parted. He gave Gale a peculiar look and told him they should all do this more often. He clapped John on the back and kissed Marge on the cheek. “Come on, baby,” He said to Edith and they were gone. Casper was quiet when they got back, unnervingly so and even though Gale guessed John wanted a drink, Marge was asleep across the back seats so they went straight back to the house.

Gale carried her quietly up the stairs and put her to the bed. He undressed her enough so she would be comfortable and left her tucked in under the covers. He kissed her forehead and then thought maybe he shouldn’t do things like that anymore since having that conversation.

“She’s out cold up there. She didn’t seem that tired when we were leaving.”

“A woman’s gotta get her beauty sleep. Especially Marge, you know, because she’s so goddamn beautiful, you lucky son of a bitch.” John pushed at Gale lightly.

“Yeah, yeah, alright,” Gale said, “You ready for bed yet?”

“You know what, I think I might be, yeah. Why? Wanta join me in there? Not sure you’d fit, but I could make room.”

Gale snickered and put his hand firmly on John’s shoulder. “Maybe tomorrow night.” There was no telling how much he actually had meant that when he said it. He couldn’t help giving into the impulse to pull John into a hug. “Thank you for today. I had a good time.”

“Yeah, so did I.” John answered when they pulled apart.

It was overtly quiet that night when Gale was trying to sleep. He couldn’t seem to since his mind was buzzing so much, because he couldn’t stop himself from imagining the images Marge had planted into his head. She had assured him more times than he could count that it was okay to want to know John as he did, to want to touch him and love him, but no amount of her words had truly managed to convince him. His conversation with Edith however had made him

realise the thing he was missing: his whole life he had been denied of feeling, either distrusted by his parents or forced to look after others in the Air Force, there was hardly a moment he had thought to consider what he truly felt. Maybe he didn't know what he wanted, he wouldn't know until he had asked for sure and tried it for himself. After today, a small quiet had smoothed his muscles and he finally started unclenching all the places he was holding so tightly. He had been afraid if he did so completely he would fall apart entirely, melt away into nothing; he is not however made up of all the things wrong with him.

The sun and water had squeezed all the muck out of him and his limbs were heavy and weighted and finally, for once, Gale felt real. He felt real, and he wanted to really act like it. After all this time, he was still just a USAAF pilot who buzzes towers with no engines left and lands his planes in blizzards, who refuses to bail out over enemy territory and lands a ship that's so shot to pieces it's hardly even a bird anymore. Gale was well-mannered and gentlemanly, but before that he was cocky and a show-off, he lived for a thrill, for the pit that formed in his stomach when he went up, when flak burst all around him just centimetres between the shrapnel and his face. Then, as he lay in bed beside his wife, images skirted in his mind and filled him with the same giddy excitement that made his stomach tingle and head ache in the sky. Pictures of John naked, of John kissing him and holding him, John's hands, his mouth on him, easy scenes of them together in the mornings and evenings; he felt like he was in the sky again.

*

Another day passed lazing about. The weather was turning unbearably warm and they spent the daytime waiting for cool nights. They went to the movie theatre again and ate out at a diner. It felt like they could spend eternity doing nothing; the day always seemed to get away from them.

Gale was still determined to proclaim to John his undying love. He was a bashful romantic at heart and wanted to be careful about it. Marge told him a thousand times over that she was sure and he trusted her. It felt like maybe he and John were already lovers sometimes, when he remembered Marge was hardly his wife anymore and he was living with him and sleeping in a room next door to his and waking up and eating breakfast with him and still listening to him shower. John never stopped hanging off him, and Gale was now starting to hold onto him, marvelling at how he had let him hang

loose for so many years. The more he thought about telling John properly, the more nerve-wracking it became, until he was bursting at the seams to make any sort of move; he was burning alive in the small days that passed, John was setting him on fire.

*

Marge had gone over to spend the evening at Edith's since Jack was out of town for a week or so to see his parents and she wanted company. She called early in the evening to say she was staying overnight and to not worry. She whispered through the phone to Gale, "Tonight's the one, baby." His stomach bubbled and fizzed like a glass of champagne, only he didn't drink.

They didn't keep alcohol in the house so John was at the bar. He has said he wouldn't be very late and he wasn't. Around ten o'clock he was through the door. Gale guessed he had expected to find Gale asleep at that hour, all alone, and almost jumped when he moved in the dark. Music echoed slow and quiet through the downstairs.

"John, you're back. When you said you'd be early I didn't really believe you."

"Got a late start tomorrow, cowboy, or just trying to be rebellious staying up this late?"

John called him *cowboy* more and more and this time it felt far more personal than *Buck* ever did. No one else called him *cowboy*, not Alex or Croz or Marge, it was just John, always only John. It was silly because there were thousands of cowboys in the world, real ones too, but Gale always felt like the only one when John said it.

"Thought I'd try living life on the wild side."

"You are the wild side, Buck. Don't you know that?" Gale laughed and let him talk because his breath was warm with drink and he was in a good mood. "Yeah, you are the danger, Buck. Always got everyone on edge, driving everybody crazy. Talk of the town they say. Hey, how comes it you're sitting here all alone in the dark?"

Gale flicked a light on and when he saw John in the dim orangey glow he felt overwhelmed. There was no possible realm in which he didn't fall in love with this man. Gale hadn't always been a sentimental man, but in that moment, as everything he had known felt small, even himself, he stared an enormity in the face, the enormous feeling that stuck in his chest and throat so he felt like his lungs might beat out of

his chest, or, no, wasn't that his heart? He looked at John and the face of his deepest desires and greatest comforts stared back just the same. Gale couldn't seem to remember why everything else had mattered so much.

"Just waiting up for you."

"For me? I'm flattered, but you shouldn't have. I was probably just gonna head to bed anyway."

There was nothing for a moment and John likely was supposed to move his way upstairs and to bed like he planned, but he stayed put, standing in Gale's living room, face flushed and perfect. Gale's stomach folded in half and he soldiered on for he was a man who'd survived the sky, the camp and that deathly journey home; his burning love for John would not fell him now.

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you about something."

He spoke it so quietly he might have not said it at all but John heard him, John who listened to his every breath and step, who knew the inside of him as easy as the out; John, who gave him the greatest gift of all: a name and everlasting companionship.

"Yeah? What is it, Buck?"

There was no uncertainty that this is what he wanted, maybe since always. After all this time, he still chooses John, time and again, John is the one he loves and he must tell him so. Music skirted quietly from behind Gale and he didn't recognise it, but he knew John did. Why would he go over to the record and check the name of it, when he could always, always just ask John?

"John-"

"John, John, John. Can't you call me something else?"

"Like what? Like *little darling*?"

An innocent blush bloomed across John's face and he went stock still. He had been leaning against the doorframe, but stood up straight then. Gale saw the words working in his mind, the reaction having emboldened him and he was unafraid. It was unmistakable; they both knew each other wholly now.

"You know, I always liked the way those words sounded coming out

your mouth." He was brave to have flirted back with the way his face was so flushed. He looked boyish.

"What other words you like to hear coming out my mouth, *little darling*?"

John

The dim light made it so Gale's face was all in shadow and John could hardly make out what he was really thinking. Buck's expression barely betrayed his thoughts anyway, but John always thought he was particularly good at reading them. It was his duty as Gale's best friend to know everything of him so very intimately, without knowing as though he loved him, which of course he couldn't do.

"Buck, I got to ask," He suddenly broke their rhythm. He couldn't let himself walk into a trap of this magnitude, John had to make sure he wasn't insane for thinking Buck had just flirted with him honestly. "I gotta know, you aren't playing with me are you?" John knew he knew.

Gale stood and walked the length of the room to John, kept walking so he was right up against him. They could hear each other's breaths, but they hadn't really needed to close the distance to do so; that was all done with since they bathed in each other's skin under the sun and in the water.

"I ain't playing if you aren't, *little darling*," He said it again, voice thick and breath heavy. Buck was an awful flirt and apparently couldn't think of anything else to say, John thought it sweet.

"About you? I never play."

They went quiet again, both uncertain of what to say next. Nothing in the whole world had mattered as much to them as each other; they were desperate to keep it as close to perfect.

Then, John thought perhaps perfect isn't something he wanted, that nothing mattered as much as Gale and he was still so desperate to touch him. They were so close. "So?" He said expectantly, "Can I take you to bed now, or would you like a dance first?"

"Oh, you know how I hate to dance."

It was nothing and everything John had imagined it would be like to kiss Gale. It had been on his mind since the third week into being his roommate all the way over in Texas. It was just an ordinary kiss, one where you opened your mouth and tasted another's, where your tongue was in their throat and theirs in yours, where you run your hands all over their body and feel the rhythm of your bodies to move together. John was no more unfamiliar kissing boys than he was girls, but to kiss this boy, he had desired nothing else for as long as he remembered and now it was happening he could hardly believe it and he thought he could be dreaming but what a cruel dream to have felt so very real.

Thoughts and ideas were running through his mind, but John didn't have a clue as to how far Buck intended to take this, how much he was comfortable with. He would take as much as he was willing to give, no matter how small or large that was. Their clothes were ruffled and they were out of breath before either of them spoke again. Buck's breath was warm and flavourless, while his aftershave surrounded the air between them. John's was cheap and usually wore off by this time and all the smell coming from him was that of alcohol. He wished he'd chewed gum or something, cleaned himself up before going into this.

"What is it we're doing here, Buck? How far you wanna go?"

"Do you want to have sex with me, John?"

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you so much for reading :)))) hope you enjoyed !!! Next chapter is gonna be neutral pov and as u can probs guess a lot of sexual content !

# Chapter 5: Part Five: Tango in the Night, Fleetwood Mac

Chapter Summary

John and Gale share a night in bed together.

Chapter Notes

Heavy sexual content !! Yippee !!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a pause before John said, “Yes.”

Gale’s head and chest had pounded with blood as he waited for an answer. There had been a few moments where he believed he had destroyed the world. When he heard John say it, everything within him burst and his organs splattered against his bones so he couldn’t bring himself to do anything more with a shred of self-consciousness; he was loose and fluid; John belonged to him and so did the world.

Gale took John’s hand and lead him slowly up the stairs, passed his own bedroom and into the guest room. It weighed on Gale to see Marge’s things about the room and to follow through with this. He was an honourable man after all, and even if Marge had encouraged him, there was nothing that could convince him to sleep with John in Marge’s bed; he couldn’t trade one for the other since he wanted them both.

“Is this okay?” Gale asked, meaning the single bed still unmade from when John woke up this morning.

“Yeah,” John could hardly fathom that Buck was asking him if the bed was okay: in the ocean, high up on a mountaintop, on the cold, hard floor of a B-17; John would do anything for Gale, wherever Gale wanted it done.

Gale was the first to undress. It was like a game the way he would remove a piece of clothing and John would follow, removing the same one. They didn’t take their eyes off one another. When he was just in his underclothes, John motioned to remove them for Gale and like that they were undressing each other. It was slow and they were teetering on the edge of awkwardness. Nothing but their breaths filled

the room. If they listened carefully the music Gale left playing downstairs could be heard niggling through the walls of the house. John recognised the tune; Bei mir bist du schön, a classic.

It was Gale's turn again and there was nothing left clothing him but his boxers. John was tentative and moved slowly. When he had sex with other people, there was never this much feeling in it, this much enormity in his every small action. This night would be forever engrained in his mind and soul, he wanted nothing more than to make it perfect for Gale.

"It's okay, go ahead," Gale said, his voice startlingly deep. They had both been silent for so long it was very loud even though he practically whispered.

John hooked his thumbs around the inside of the waistband and pulled and pulled until he let them drop around Gale's ankles. His stomach rumbled at the sight, acid and nerves bubbling around so he felt hot and breathless standing still. It wasn't so much that he was staring at Gale's cock, but instead that every orifice of his body was smooth and clean; unblemished warm skin, hardly any body hair, and strong muscles. He was all soft, round edges, in his face a tender expression and all the want in the world in those blue, blue eyes.

Gale couldn't help but smile shyly when John swept the length of him slowly with his eyes. He sat himself on the end of the bed and pulled at John's own underwear. He didn't know quite how embarrassed John was of his body in front of him. He had gained weight in the year that had passed and all those years building muscle in the American Army Air Force were far behind him. To Gale though, it was comforting, it acted as a sign of his return to civilian life and that John was living well.

He had watched John physically crumple the more clothes they each removed, growing more uncomfortable with himself. He stood closed off and cornered. "You look well John," Gale said looking up at him, John's cock so close to his face, but he kept his eyes trained up on his face.

He reached up to touch his stomach, and John flinched, "Your hands are cold." John wrapped his own large hands around Gale's and breathed into them. It was an uncommonly sensual action. "Better?" Gale nodded and pulled his hand away and dragged his fingers across his midriff and down to his thighs, tousled the dark, curled hair all across them. He snaked around their thickness and then up across

John's ass to rest in the divot of his lower back. He moved slowly; the whole dark, quiet night was ahead of them. He stood up, trailing his hands all along the length of John's back and then they were looking into each other's eyes. Gale's hands were cold again and they were climbing across John's shoulders, up his neck and holding his face.

"Say something. Talk to me, Buck."

"You've got nice broad shoulders, I never noticed." He put his lips to John's lightly and kissed him sweetly. "Can't tell you how many times I've seen these shoulders."He huffed out a laugh that was barely audible, "Nothing sexy about shoulders. I didn't know." He pushed the pads of his fingers against his cheeks as though he was trying to open him up with his touch, "I wasn't ever really looking."

John clasped his hands around Gale's long, thin fingers and pulled them down along his skin, guided them down to his chest roughly over his nipples. "You're looking now."

"We wasted so much time," Gale whispered.

John felt uniquely solemn, like he wasn't expecting to hear and feel such things for as long as he lived, and now they were his, he didn't know what to do with them.

"There is enough left."

They were breathing one another's air, feeling the heat of their mouths, they might have been the same creature then, one breath traded for another, an equivalent exchanging of the material that sustained them; *return to me and I will return to you*; John couldn't help himself, his eyes were wet with tears.

Gale fiddled with the crucifix John wore around his neck, held it between his fingers. He closed his fist around it and asked, "Do you take it off?"

"If I did, wouldn't that make all of this meaningless? What I do in the name of God is honest and true."

"Even sex?"

"Especially sex," John smiled and ran his own hands across the length of Gale's torso and further down, where he wrapped his fingers around and touched his hardening cock, "That's where your true feelings are. In your actions and in your body."

Gale groaned at the sensation of John's hands on him. He pulled them together and their tongues were in each other's mouths again, his arms wrapped tightly around his neck. John was tightening his grip, moving his fist back and forth slowly so now Gale was groaning into his mouth, breath hotter and thicker than before.

They couldn't help but pick up the pace: too much waiting can extinguish the flame of desire. John picked Gale up and lay him down on the bed, put his unfathomably beautiful legs over his shoulders and finally closed his mouth around his cock. He worked his tongue and teeth and throat until saliva was dripping from the corners of his lips and Gale was moaning loudly; instinctively he thrust upward into John's mouth, hard, almost like he was trying to make him gag, but he wouldn't. His head was thrown back and his face scrunched, when he looked down he recognised that he was fucking John's face. John's face, which was flushed and bleary-eyed. John, who was drooling all over Gale's cock and watching his face to see if he was doing a good job.

Then he was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and climbing up on top of Gale, straddling him. He was breathing hard for he hadn't paused to take a single breath all while sucking him off. "Are your feelings with your body? How do you feel?" His voice was hoarse, like it hurt to swallow Gale's dick so far down his throat. Gale let go of the sheets he was gripping and put his hands on John's thighs; they were no longer cold. John pulled hands through Gale's hair and kissed him, mouth full of the smell of his own breath and spit, John reached in for the flavour of Gale's instead.

John loved to see Gale's face, his full cheeks turned red, plump lips so kissed they could be swollen, the shimmer and dazzle of his teeth when he smiled down at John. They were sweaty and hot, muscles tensed as they chased the sensations pulsing through them like blood, like they'd shrivel and die without it. The air around them was thick and smelled of their skin, of the aftershave the very letter that sat on the bedside stand was covered in.

In the dim light of the room John watched Gale's face split further open as he sucked bruises onto his collarbones, as he spat into his hand and moved to put Gale's slicked penis between his cheeks. They were grunting and panting like bears, their bodies heaving up and down and next to each other. Gale was thrusting his hips up and down, fucking John in all honesty, his face like nothing John had ever seen. No girl or boy had ever looked this way for him; no girl or boy had been the one to push against him, adamant on giving rather than

receiving in every other case.

It wasn't long before John was whining and moving his hands towards his own hard cock, which had remained untouched before now. Gale saw and pulled his hands away, licked his own and clenched a fist around John's penis, like he had done his crucifix. He held his body together fiercely, muscles pulled tight and strained, like he was bracing for impact, or rather trying to squeeze the orgasm forming out of himself. It was absurd: Gale was in bed again, tensing like the weight of the world was on him; was it too forward of him to say that it really was this time? His body was drenched in a surging heat and he moved faster, thrust harder. There was no penetration, but he felt like he really was inside John, he swore he could feel his warmth around his cock like it was buried deep in him.

Gale was coming before he knew it and it was all over too soon. The heat flushed through his body, from his groin and out his fingers and toes, pleasure wracking itself deep inside him, until his body lay back on the mattress so still he could have been a corpse. He looked up to see the sweat glistening along John's forehead and cheekbones, his downcast gaze. John's hands were on his chest, pressing into his heart and he could feel the cavity shaped by him taking form there on the walls, for no one to see but himself.

His own hands had gone slack around John's cock and, looking at him, he suddenly remembered how intent he had been on satisfying him, as John had done for him. He pulled himself out from under John and sat back, legs folded neatly in front of him.

"How close are you?"

"Not very since you took your hands off me."

"Do you want to fuck me, John? Properly?"

"You mean-?"

Gale was sure of himself, had hardly been more sure of anything in his life. He nodded.

"You haven't done this before, have you?"

He shook his head; he was nervous for him to have pointed it out.

John's cock was painfully hard and it throbbed at the suggestion. In every late night image he conjured, it had never been this way

around. For all his bravado, John was satisfied for Gale having thrust his own dick in his ass and offering to touch him. He couldn't help himself but want more than he had imagined having, he would have whatever Gale was willing to give, whether that was hanging off his shoulder in England or fucking his ass in America.

There was no manual in queer sex, but it wasn't a very difficult concept to grasp. John was on his back and Gale was on top of him now, hands pressed against John's tubby stomach, he was spreading his fingers out and admiring his form, how strong John was, his rough and blotched his skin was like the thick trunk of a tree. His shoulders really were nice.

John was moving slowly so as to make it gentle for Gale, conscious of how fleeting something like this was. What if he was made uncomfortable and was unable to forget it?

Then, Gale grunted out, "For all your talk John, you fuck like a pansy."

"What?"

"Honest and true?" He rolled his body to lie down flat on top of John and spoke against his ear, "You're a dirty liar, baby."

There it was again, the thick voice and hot breath, the way he practically batted his lashes at John, how he called him *baby*. It sent shivers scalding down through him and straight to his cock, which was still inside Gale.

After that it was forcefully aggressive and John was making Gale scream and shout. He kept having to remind himself that they were alone, in a room he hadn't paid to spend the night in, on the edges of a quiet, lonely town where they knew no one but each other; no one would come looking for them. Gale was coming again, all over John's chest and stomach, his body thumping with his thrusts and John could feel his own orgasm building. He moved faster, harder, until he was whining and saying to Gale, "I'm gonna-"

He tried pulling Gale off him, but he insisted, "It's okay, go on." And John had sounded like he was crying how his voice cracked with the moan and grunting.

*

A single bed is only enough room for one man. Even then, depending

on his size, it might not be sufficient space for him to lie comfortably. The truth of it was that Gale was uncomfortable. He knew John to be as well. They were either squeezed up against the wall or teetering on the edge of the mattress. Their feet hung off the end, arms skewed and one of which John had beneath Gale was in the process of falling asleep. They were pressed together from their heads down to their toes, and it was cold where their skin didn't connect.

They stayed like that for mere minutes before John was slinking away, pulling his limbs out like they were caught in a trap. Gale followed him up and took hold of his hand, looking at him with irises blown wide in the dark.

"Hey, where you going?"

"To get dressed, clean up."

"Can't we sit for a while?"

"You know, between men, kind of an unspoken rule that you get out as soon as you can." John laughed, "But I guess you aren't just any man."

Gale shook his head, "And this ain't no single night. It's not a hookup. You think I'd have done that to you? To myself? If I can't have you every night I don't want you for one."

John's heart was pounding again. Gale spoke every word so thickly he must have known what he was doing to John. It was unusual seeing a naked man asking to lie beside him for a bit, like they were really lovers. He didn't think such a thing could exist for queers. In all the years John quietly yearned for Gale's touch, he had wished if only one of them could have been a girl. Now, here, looking at Gale, his strong form and hard features; oh, how he loved this man with his whole being and he would change nothing for it.

He let Gale pull him back onto the bed and they curled up together. John kissed Gale, really kissed him, hard and long, like his mouth was being pulled into Gale's. He was biting his lips and tasting his teeth, every breath full of the flavour of Gale, his sweating skin and his semen too, in the air around them both. The room smelt, they smelt, it was awful except for that it was everything they'd each dreamed of.

Gale traced the creases of John's hands and, looking at him through his lashes, said, "Hey, you wanta go dancing?"

“What? You just said yourself, you hate dancing.”

“I’ve never actually tried before.”

“What, never? Where are we supposed to go?”

“Just downstairs.” Gale was up and dragging John through the corridor by the hand, “I don’t think I even turned it off down there. I’m not sure what Marge’s got, but there’s probably something you’ll know.” He flicked through a stack of records, mumbling to himself that he didn’t recognise a single one.

“Sex put a pep in your step, Buck?” John asked.

Gale grinned at him, “Always.”

They were still naked and with everything so fresh and new to John of Gale’s body, he was still drawn to his face. Something about it had changed since a day or two ago. He thought that he would know Buck’s face forever, and yet some small change was mystifying him. He thought, maybe you couldn’t know anyone as much as you’d like; people change after all. He looked down at his own body to see that he certainly had: he thought he looked more like a thirty year old man than he ever did, his stomach no longer flat, skin rough and blemished, blotches of it discoloured all up his arms. John seemed to retreat into himself then. He felt like he was unpleasant to look at and crossed his arms to hide.

He said, “I think I’m gonna go grab something to cover up. Be back in just a second.” He had made it about halfway up the stairs, taking two at a time, before Gale asked him why. He couldn’t admit he was embarrassed. Maybe he didn’t need to say it the way he hunched his shoulders and leaned into the darkness.

“Johnny, baby, I wanta dance like this.” The music was quite soft still but the tune had changed to something more upbeat. Gale turned the volume up and pulled John back into the room. It wasn’t a very large room but it was enough, Gale thought.

Gale looped his arms underneath John’s own and hooked his hands around his shoulders, put his head against John’s chest and they swayed with the music. They would occasionally touch each other’s cocks and almost jump at the feeling; unusual, to have done all that upstairs only to become bashful in the living room.

“I can hear your heart beating.” Gale said, “Ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-

bump."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I want to dance."

"Okay. We'll just dance."

"Maybe eventually. Maybe later."

"Okay."

"John you know I find you very handsome and beautiful."

"I think you're beautiful, too, Buck."

"Can you call me cowboy?"

"Anything you want, cowboy."

"Is there anything you want me to call you?"

"Call me whatever you like."

"Okay. I'll call you baby from now on."

"Okay, cowboy."

Okay, baby."

They smiled at each other and pressed their lips together. Naked and kissing in the living room, listening to something probably by Benny Goodman, John and Gale thought they might consume one another with the desire that stormed in each their hearts.

*

Later, they are lying in bed together again, and John asks Gale again if he is up to the task of talking. If not, he can listen, would he like to listen? Yes, Gale thinks he'd like that a lot. So, John opens his mouth and talks. It isn't as he usually talks Gale's ear off about sport or music, because there's a carefulness to his words; John loves Gale and he knows it, he doesn't have to ask, it's in every word he speaks.

"The first time I knew I liked you was way back in Texas. I was glad to have such a pretty roommate, something to look forward to at the end of the day, looking at you. We became fast friends I think through my

sheer force of will. Wasn't long before I knew how I felt, I think I felt too much to just want to be your friend. I'm the kind of guy who takes what he can get. I got to be your friend, and there was nothing worth more than that to me. I tried telling you in all the little ways I knew how that wouldn't be too suspicious. Like, for Christ's sake, the way I always had my hands on you. Or the things I'd say to you, 'I'm gonna bet on us'? I don't know what I was doing.

"When we fought in the stalag, I was just relieved to be close to you. If I think back now on how I was acting in there, I just cringe. I can't stand thinking about it. We never really talked about how unbearable I was being. I'm sorry that I was. I couldn't stop thinking about how I was going to die in there and I'd have nothing to show for my life. I was terrified of dying alone mostly. I almost did a couple times. In that corpse pile. Dying alone next to a bunch of strangers' corpses? I'll tell you, cowboy, an awful way to go. It was so cold, and the smell? The godawful smell. None of it matters much now anyhow, we're out of there now and here, with each other."

"Tell me more about how you felt about me."

"I thought you were the most beautiful boy I'd ever seen. I'd only been with girls before then. I've been with men since, but you were my first. Your country accent was the sweetest thing I'd heard and you were so shy I thought you'd melt out your skin if I talked to you for more than a minute."

"You don't miss how I was?"

"No, how could I? You're just as sweet and beautiful, and this Gale likes me back. What could make me change that?"

Gale kissed his lips, pulled his head into his chest and kissed the top of his head, stroked his hair and listened to his breaths.

"John you mean so much to me. I want you to know."

"Thank you for letting me know."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Always."

"I seen you sometimes at base, going to church. I know you tried hiding it. Why's it you did that?"

“I know you aren’t really God’s biggest fan. I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“It wouldn’t have. Made me uncomfortable. Nothing about you makes me uncomfortable.”

They were quiet for a few moments. The feel of each other’s skin was still overwhelming.

“How do you do it, doing all this, then going to church on Sunday?”

John endeavoured to answer as simply as he could. “If God is real, he loves me. If not, there’s nothing to worry about. What people deem sinful, not sinful, it’s all made up. We’re not the ones who should pass judgement. We have his words, but we know in our hearts what’s wrong and what’s not.”

“But you sit there and listen to them preach about you going to hell?”

“People don’t know what they mean. They say things without understanding. Would you hate a child for saying two and two is five? They’ll get there in their own time. And if not, it’s not worth hating someone because they can’t see. It’s their loss.”

“You’re so kind,” Gale laughs, “What about god? He understands. He must. And yet he does say it’s wrong. How can you stand to hear it?”

“You hate God for not loving you even though he does. There’s nothing wrong with you. He made you the way he wanted. It’s just not the way your father wanted. Your father isn’t God, Buck. He’s just another man. Took me a long time to figure that one out.”

Gale thinks he could cry for the way John speaks to him so softly and so beautifully. He can’t help but kiss him. He touches his body also, moves his hands all across his back and stomach and chest, around his neck and shoulders, moves his body so their groins are closer together.

“You’re the light of my eyes.” Gale says.

They fell asleep in each other’s arms and when morning came they took turns showering and ate breakfast and waited for Marge to come home. When she did, she smiled at them both and the way they each looked at each other before they smiled back she knew in seconds what had happened between them. She laughed and smiled and chatted with them idly. Edith and her had gone out to drink last night and didn’t get back until very late and crashed down together in her

bed still with their shoes on. She can hardly remember what happened last night. Marge took her usual spot at the table and waited while Gale cooked her something.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you thank you for reading !! Initially this was going to be longer about 3 more chapters but unfortunately I have 0 plot ideas and so I'm just gonna end it with this one !!!! Thank you again for reading and I hope you enjoyed :))))

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